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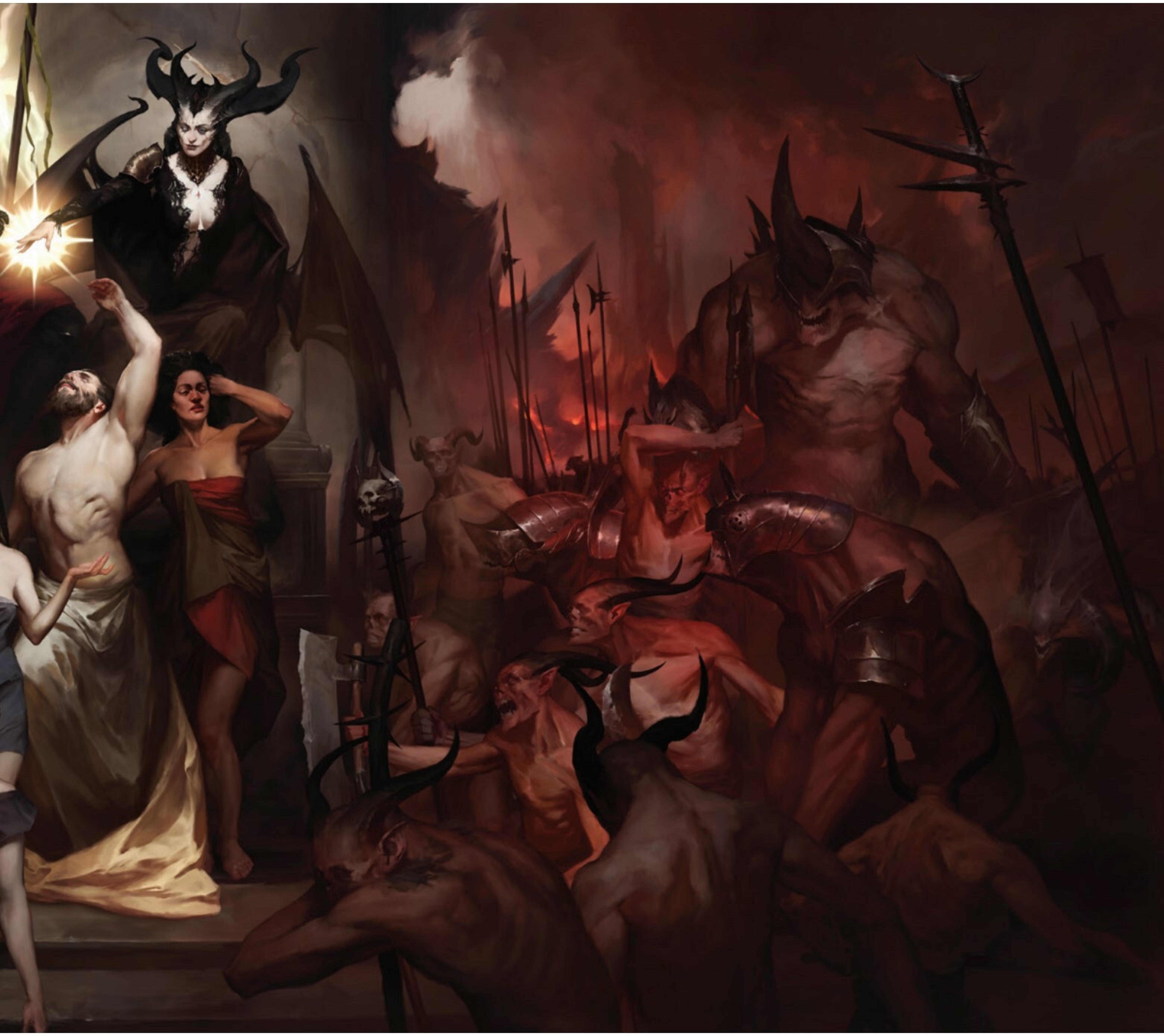
DIABLO IV



↘
This stunning piece by Igor Sidorenko portrays union of angel and demon, or the "Birth of the Nephalem," one of the foundational moments in the Diablo universe. The repercussions of that event echo across the centuries all the way to the events of Diablo IV. Read our cover story on p. 34 to learn more about what's on the way in Blizzard's long-anticipated release.

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE BLURRING LINE

A LOT OF PEOPLE NOW LIVE WITH one foot in the real world and one in virtual spaces. That's especially true for video game fans, who spend even more leisure time exploring and inhabiting non-real experiences. While the places we visit in games may not be real, our social and emotional experiences can still carry surprising weight.

Given that, it should come as no surprise that we've all begun to see an increased blurring of the lines between virtual and real life and a commensurate increase in the stories and experiences speaking to that unusual dynamic we all navigate.

It's a topic that's been on my mind recently. This month's issue features a couple of stories that drove home the interconnected nature of our virtual and real lives. We felt compelled to share the heartbreaking essay on grief by contributor James Tocchio (p. 28), who recalls where he found unexpected links between the classic game Shenmue and his family's devastating loss. At the other end of the emotional spectrum is Matt Shore's piece on an old summer job conning people into believing they were experiencing virtual reality (when they weren't), which you can read on p. 26. If you're like me, the story will make you laugh out loud, even as it reminds us how much we all look to interactive experiences for novelty and excitement.

The uncanny situations that arise from the virtual/real divide struck me once again as we prepared this issue to go to print and the news surfaced of actor Lance Reddick's sudden passing. The accomplished performer was a memorable fixture of TV and film. He was also no stranger to gaming, with notable appearances in several projects, including the Horizon and Destiny franchises.

In the latter of those roles, Reddick inhabited a character many Destiny players viewed as a centerpiece in their nightly gaming for nearly ten years. In the days that followed Reddick's death, many Destiny players gathered close to his in-game character in solidarity, seeming to offer some measure of appreciation and sorrow for his loss. I found it equal parts moving and strange; so many people felt connected to this actual person, but entirely through a virtual persona he adopted in a video game.

Games (and their power to impact us) continue to fascinate me. We have no shortage of releases on the horizon that promise to fuel that shared engagement. I hope you enjoy the issue and a glimpse into some of the games we may all inhabit in the coming months.

Play well. Be well.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

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2

DIABLO IV

This month we interviewed team leads at Blizzard to discuss the making of Diablo IV, and dig deep into what awaits after the campaign concludes and players move into the endgame. Read the full story on p. 34.

Our subscriber edition cover features the rogue angel Inarius (1), as inscrutable and powerful as ever. This month's gold edition cover features the daughter of Mephisto herself, Lilith (2). Both pieces come to us from revered fantasy artist Brom.

GAMEINFORMER

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Cries every time he hears "Dearly Beloved" from Kingdom Hearts

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Still running from the SkiFree Yeti

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Keeps a tab open with concept art by Kekai Kotaki to marvel at on rainy days

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Believes The Lord of the Rings *trilogy is always worth the yearly rewatch*

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Blake Hester

Senior Associate Editor

I recently saw *964 Pinocchio*, directed by Shozin Fukui. On top of having one of the most transfixing on-screen vomits of all time, it's probably one of the most arresting pieces of cyberpunk media I've seen. You should seek it out; Media Blasters recently remastered it onto a beautiful blu-ray. This got me thinking about how lucky we are to have boutique publishers still giving these weird, niche films this treatment. From Arrow to Massacre, Severin to Synapse, and many more, we live in the best era to be a little movie freak.

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

It's only spring, and I feel like I'm already behind on my backlog of games for this year. When you're reading this, I'm plugging away at Resident Evil 4 and have titles such as Like a Dragon: Ishin!, Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty, Tchia, Wild Hearts, and others I need to either start or resume playing. I blame the fact that I've been reading a lot more; shoutout to *Seven Games* by Oliver Roeder and *Tokyo Vice* by Jake Adelstein (check out my feature with Mr. Adelstein in last month's issue) as my recent literary distractions.

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The viral game developer behind Ghostwire: Tokyo and the new indie studio Unseen took us into the streets of Japan late at night to look at a bunch of cows and talk about dying.

28 **SHENMUE IS A BEAUTIFUL GRIEF SIMULATOR**

For some, Shenmue is a goofy life sim full of bad acting and stilted writing. But for one father, Yu Suzuki's magnum opus is a tool for understanding loss and grief.

34 **COVER STORY – DIABLO IV**

As Diablo IV nears release, we chatted with Blizzard to delve into the game's massive endgame content. Read ten pages breaking down the Paragon board, Helltide, Nightmare Dungeons, and more.

44 **EXOPRIMAL**

It's a crisis of dinos. We've played Capcom's surprising new multiplayer shooter, killed our fair share of velociraptors, and we're ready to tell you all about it.

78 **THE STATE OF META AND VR**

Despite numerous arguments against it, Meta (previously known as Facebook) is betting big on the Metaverse. We talked to the people in charge about the hows and whys behind this massive investment.

regulars

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CAN A SANDWICH CRAFTED WITH DELECTABLY ROASTED CUTS MAKE YOUR TASTE BUDS QUAKE WITH YEARNING?

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OVEN ROASTED
TURKEY BREAST

OH, HILL YEAH.™

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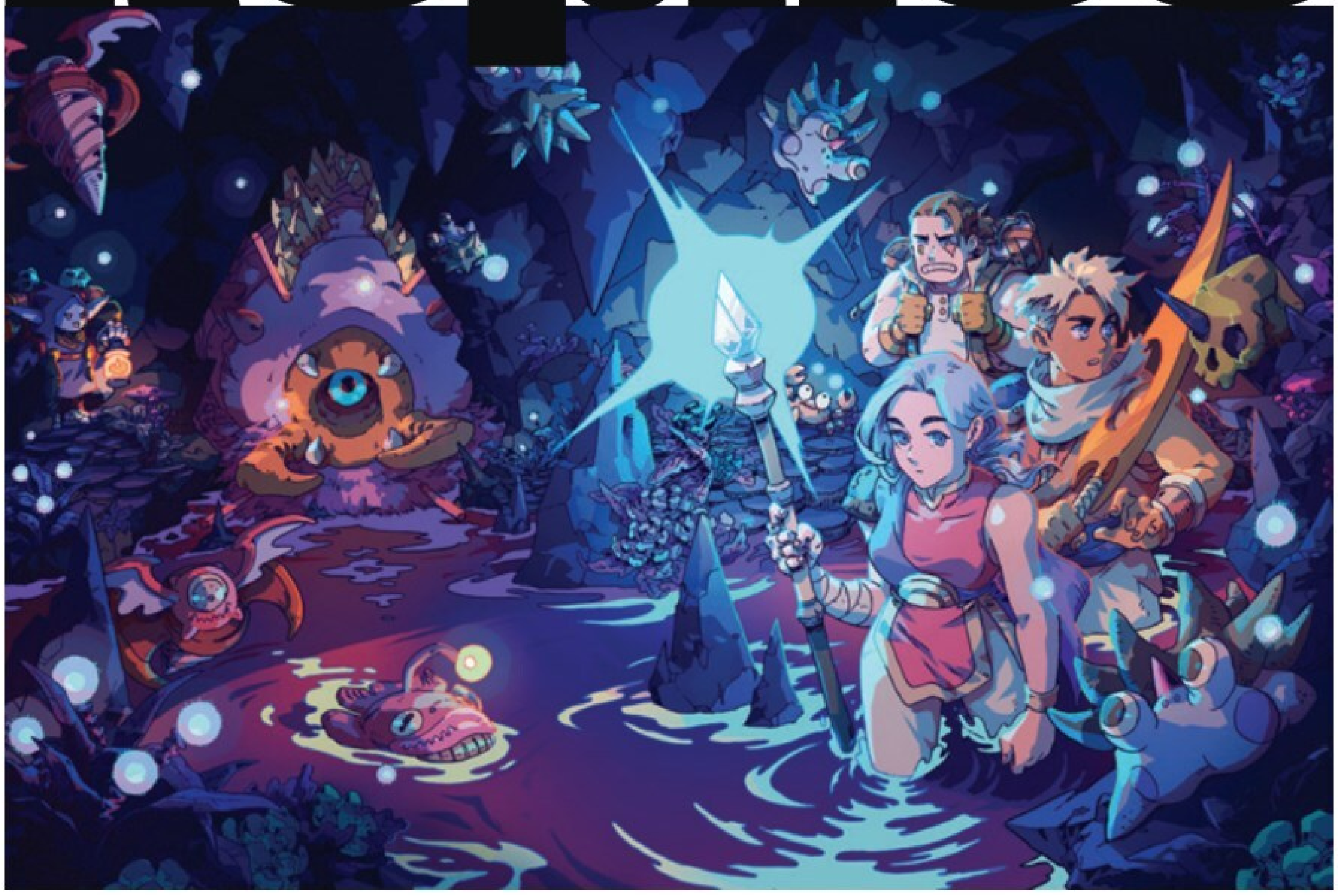
Replies



DITCHING THE DISC

Will a publisher ever release a triple-A title on disc for PC again? I really miss physical PC games. I still have a few that will work with Windows 10, but not many. Most require me to install a patch or something to make it work. **– DarthDuke via email**

↳ *We all know the industry as a whole has been shifting more towards digital sales over the last decade-plus, but PC gaming pretty much led that charge. Before PS4 and Xbox One started pushing players to download their triple-A games instead of grabbing them from a shelf, Steam was giving players unparalleled access to their ever-growing libraries without needing a disc. Software downloads have become so common that many modern desktop PCs and laptops don't even include disc drives unless you add them as an option.*

All of those factors combine with the cost-efficiency of digital downloads to provide very little incentive to triple-A publishers. Why go through the hassle and cost of printing boxes, pressing discs, and shipping packages when the vast majority of PC gamers seem to prefer digital storefronts like Steam and Epic Games Store? Then, as you indicated, we live in a time when just because you have a disc, you still may need to download a substantial day-one patch just to get it to work. It's a sad reality for those of us who still prefer physical media over digital media, but likely the one to which we'll all need to adapt.

SPREADING THE LOVE

I love some of the Mega Man games better than others. It is sad to see some are ignored or overlooked, such as Mega Man Legends 1 and 2, Network Transmission, or X: Command Mission. These are never put into a Legacy or any kind of Mega Man compilation that comes out. I played X: Command Mission on the PS2 back in the day, then Network Transmission on GameCube. I just wish that Capcom would show the same love to the other games instead of ignoring them. They are excellent games and some of my favorites. **– Rocky via email**

↳ *Over the last decade, Capcom has started paying attention again to its iconic Blue Bomber, but before that, it was dire straits. The series started showing more signs of life with the release of 2015's Mega Man Legacy Collection. In the subsequent years, we've received a second Mega Man Legacy Collection, two Mega Man X collections, and compilations devoted to the dormant Battle Network and Zero/ZX subseries, not to mention the all-new Mega Man 11 in 2018. With all of Capcom's attention going to other subseries, it makes sense to feel left out when corners of the franchise like Legends feel neglected. However, the franchise is undeniably better in 2023 than in 2013, so we're hopeful we'll see some of the less-acknowledged subseries get their dues in the coming years.*

TEARS OF JOY

Hey there, *GI* crew! 39-year-old gamer dude here who turns the big 4-0 this April! I'm a big fan of the Legend of Zelda games and have been playing them since the first Legend of Zelda in the '80s. A Link to the Past, Wind Waker, and Breath of the Wild are my favorite entries – each is a 10 out of 10 in my book – and I appreciate how the series has always been able to adapt and try inventive new things, even if some of them don't exactly hit a homerun. Tears of the Kingdom is all the buzz right now, and, needless to say, I'm pumped for it. Do you guys think it will be the most inventive Zelda game yet, and what's your gut feeling about how it will stack up to Breath of the Wild?
– Jake D. via email

↳ *When Breath of the Wild arrived in 2017, it effectively turned one of the most universally beloved franchises on its head (while also somewhat returning to the original formula that made the first game work). While that's a massive risk for any company to take, Nintendo has proven time and time again that its attempts at evolving its long-running franchises have a higher success rate than most other publishers. That's particularly true with Zelda, which has changed innumerable ways over the years. Breath of the Wild is just another example – albeit an extreme one – of Nintendo creating a fresh experience that is still undeniably a part of the Legend of Zelda series.*

Tears of the Kingdom looks far less innovative and more iterative on Breath of the Wild's formula, but that's fine with us – we'll gladly take any reasons to explore one of the best Hyrules ever created. Still, the game promises several evolutions of what Breath of the Wild gave us, including what appears to be a weapons and vehicle crafting system, cave and sky exploration, and, last but not least, the introduction of Ganondorf into this version of Hyrule. Breath of the Wild set a seemingly impossible bar for Tears of the Kingdom to clear, but if any team is up to the task, it's the developer behind the Zelda franchise.

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THAT'S DEEP JANINE.
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Soundoff: Most Replayed Game

We asked our readers and community which game they have replayed the most times and why. Here are some of their answers.

Shinobi III: Return of the Ninja Master is a game that I've replayed dozens of times. The platforming, combat, and boss encounters are absolute masterclasses in 2D action/platformer game design. Few games from that era reach the heights that Shinobi III did in my opinion. **– via Instagram**

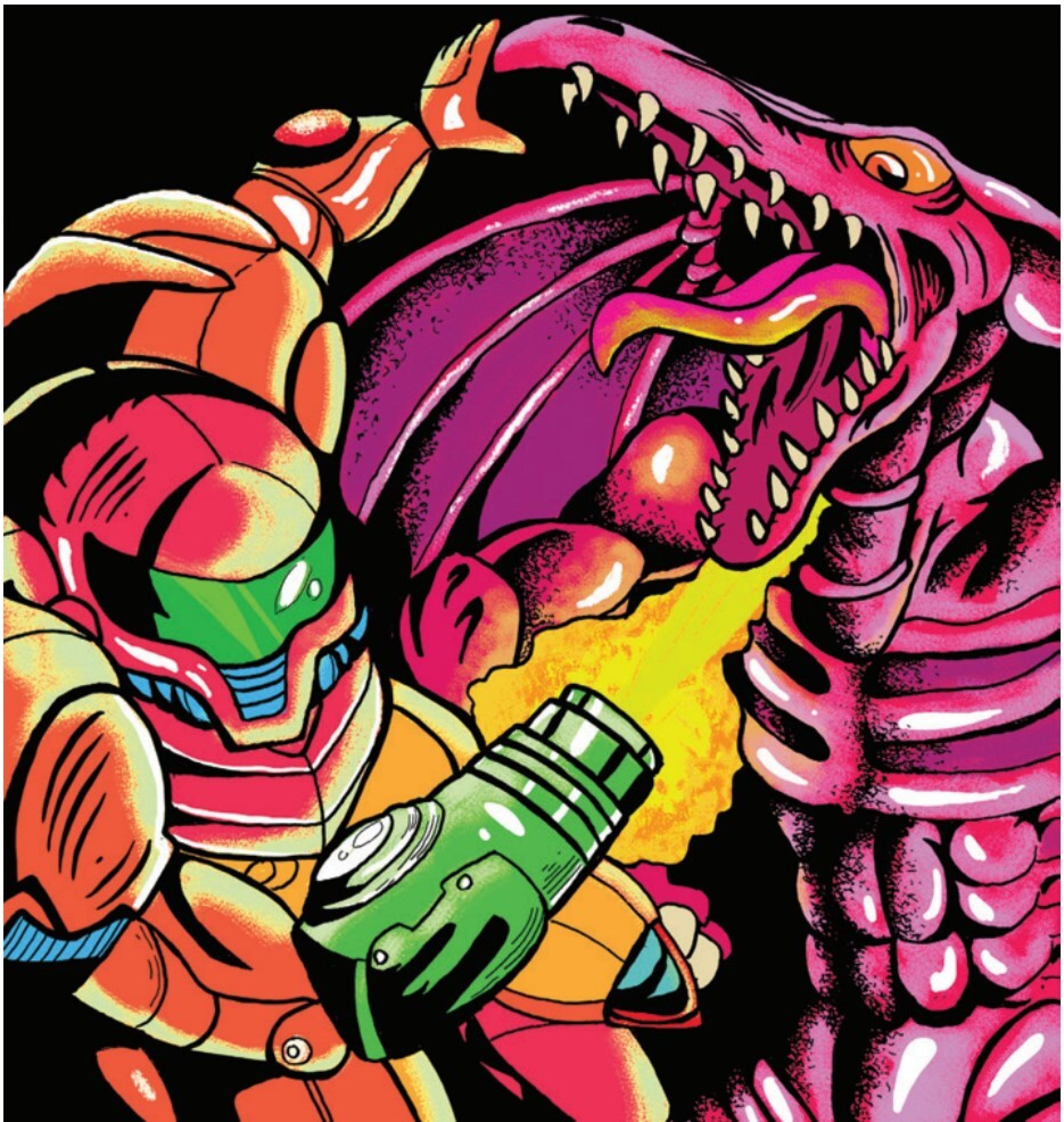
I remember when I got Resident Evil 2 for PS1. I couldn't wait to go home and try it, and it didn't disappoint. I played it like four or five times just to get the weapons with unlimited ammo. It was awesome playing with unlimited RPG ammo.
– littlebigmatador via email

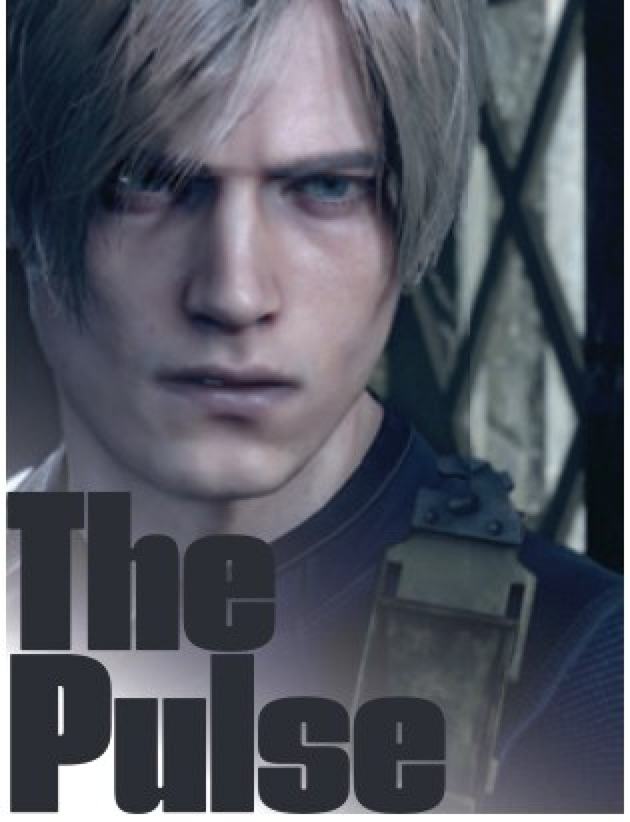
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater. The story, the acting, the cinema – it was Kojima at the height of his powers. I love the Boss' character arc and seeing the "birth" of Big Boss.
– LegendofGamer102 via Discord

This is easily Dragon Age as a series for me. I have yet to play a game quite like it. Adventure, drama, romance, action, and an engaging cast like no other game. I never find myself bored listening to interactions I've heard 20 times before, nor do I find myself bored when I'm casting spells as a blood mage or jumping into shadows as a rogue. Although Dragon Age isn't unique in its classes, the variety of skills available makes each playthrough feel like a completely different way to play. There are also the times I find something new in a world I've spent a thousand or more hours in. **– Derek M via email**

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. It was my go-to game to play when I was bored and I got pretty good at finishing the entire game in one sitting. **– Wenadin via Discord**

Reader art winner: Matt Marks





The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. **Resident Evil 4**
2. **Hogwarts Legacy**
3. **Diablo IV Open Beta**
4. **Horizon Forbidden West**
5. **Cyberpunk 2077**
6. **The Last of Us Part 1**
7. **Assassin's Creed Valhalla**
8. **Xenoblade Chronicles 3**
9. **Dead Space**
10. **Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty**

↓
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GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

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RESIDENT EVIL 4

3

GAMEINFORMER

4

1.

While in attendance at WWE Royal Rumble in San Antonio, Texas, Marcus got to chat with Superstar Drew McIntyre before going hands-on with WWE 2K23

2.

Alex and Marcus flew to Osaka, Japan, to meet up with the Resident Evil 4 development team at Capcom, including producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi, director Yasuhiro Ampo, and art director Hirofumi Nakaoka

3.

Brian visited Bandai Namco in Irvine, California, to play Tekken 8 and chat with producer Michael Murray and executive producer Katsuhiro Harada. You can read our hands-on preview on p. 63 and see the full video on our YouTube channel

4.

While at Bandai Namco to see Tekken 8, Brian ran into a couple of familiar faces in former *Game Informer* staffers Daniel Tack and Alex Stadnik

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FINAL FANTASY XVI

6

7

9

8

5.

Wesley recently traveled to New York to play a little Final Fantasy XVI and interview localization director Michael-Christopher Koji Fox, director Hiroshi Takai, producer Naoki Yoshida, and combat director Ryota Suzuki

6.

The stars showed up in force at the premiere of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* in Los Angeles, California, including Chris Pratt, Charlie Day, Seth Rogen, Jack Black, Anya Taylor-Joy, and Shigeru Miyamoto

7.

Japan has many amazing sights to see, so naturally, Alex and Brian needed to check out Osaka Castle with Capcom's Jesse Steinberg, Denny Chiu, and Hiroshi Okun

8.

While in Osaka, Japan, we ventured to an arcade with Street Fighter 6 director Takayuki Nakayama and producer Shuhei Matsumoto. You can see a video documenting this game center excursion on *Game Informer*'s YouTube channel

9.

Alex and Blake joined Spelunky creator Derek Yu in West Hills, California, for real-life spelunking. You can watch a documentary about the experience on *Game Informer*'s YouTube channel ■

SUPER MARIO MAKERS

We talk with Shigeru Miyamoto, Chris Pratt, and more to learn about the process of bringing Nintendo's beloved mascot back to the silver screen with *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* **BY BRIAN SHEA**

In 1993, when 11-year-old Seth Rogen left the theater after seeing *Super Mario Bros.* starring Bob Hoskins, John Leguizamo, and Dennis Hopper, he did so with a new perspective on what movies can be. Unfortunately, this worldview-changing experience probably isn't what the filmmakers were hoping for.

"I grew up with Mario Bros.; I was hugely into video games when I was young," the actor says. "As an 11-year-old, seeing that first Mario Bros. movie was a truly disappointing experience to me. [...] I think it was the movie that showed me movies could be bad, which didn't even occur to me before that."

Rogen's experience is not unique; many young moviegoers left the theater in 1993 feeling burned by the licensed adaptation. While that film has garnered a cult following in the three decades since, fans have yearned for a more faithful adaptation featuring the world and characters of Nintendo's flagship franchise.

"I think the people who made [the 1993 movie] put a lot of work into it, but I think the difference is that the movie that was made 30 years ago, we licensed the Mario IP, and they made the movie," Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto says. "This time, we were looking to get into movies and do the movie production ourselves instead of licensing it."

Fast forward to the early 2010s, and Nintendo was ready to bring its franchise back to movie theaters. Miyamoto talked with Illumination CEO Chris Meledandri, and they discovered their creative processes were similar. Because of that, Nintendo partnered with Illumination to create a brand-new movie starring Mario and his friends.

Directors Aaron Horvath and Michael Jelenic used experiences like Rogen's as a guiding experience for the creation of 2023's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. "I wanted to make the movie that I wanted to see when I was a kid," Horvath says. "If there were fans like us who were making movies back then, this is the movie that they would have made."

The two directors credit having people who grew up with games in leadership roles as to why video game adaptations are of much higher quality in recent years. But that's not the only reason. "I think in the past, there was maybe a cynical approach to adapting it," Jelenic says. "People making this stuff understood it was popular but didn't understand why it was popular. The people who are making it now, they had an emotional experience. It's coming from a less cynical place. This stuff is meaningful to us."

That investment is what ultimately drew Rogen to the role of Donkey Kong in the film. In talking with actors like Chris Pratt and Charlie Day, it's clear the franchise is also important to them. "It's nice to be a part of the collaborative team that is responsible for being so mindful and careful about these characters that people do care so much about," Pratt says. "You want to get it right. For me, I wouldn't want them to screw it up, and the best way for me to make sure they don't screw it up is to jump in and be a part of it."

One big way Nintendo wanted to remain faithful was by sticking solely to Mario references rather

than introducing new elements just for the purpose of the film. “I think it’s natural that there’s a tendency or desire to create something new – a new character specifically for this,” Miyamoto says. “There’s plenty of assets and content in the Mario world that we can use. So, let’s start there, and let’s see what we can use there. We realized that after putting all of that into the movie that there’s so much that the Mario world has that we still have leftovers that we weren’t able to use.”

The Super Mario Bros. Movie delivers an experience way closer to the source material, showing clear respect and love for the games. The references include several visual nods to Mario and Nintendo’s past, dating all the way back to the main character’s origins as Jumpman. But perhaps permeating more throughout the experience are the audio references, which are thanks to composer Brian Tyler and longtime Nintendo composer Koji Kondo.

Kondo credits Tyler for finding the right places to fit the music and audio cues into the film, but Kondo was far from hands-off. “What we did on my end was look at different scenes from the movie and made up a list of music that I thought would enhance them,” he says. “Brian took the game music that we had shared with him – the game music that he was aware of – and added it in the right places throughout the movie score to enhance the experience for the audience.”

While in these various discussions, the actors, directors, and Nintendo luminaries all came across as genuinely proud of what they’ve created. Had something like this movie been what people like Seth Rogen saw in 1993, it’s impossible to say how the trajectory of video game movies would have changed in the subsequent 30 years. At least now, with adaptions like Netflix’s *Castlevania*, HBO’s *The Last of Us* series, and Nintendo’s return to the cinemas, it finally feels like we’re on the right track. ■

The Super Mario Bros. Movie is in theaters now. For our full review and the unabridged versions of these interviews, head to GameInformer.com

FINDING THEIR VOICES

We asked three of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* stars how they landed on the voice they used in the film. Here are their responses:

Chris Pratt Mario

It really all just comes down to story. This is a storytelling medium. Video games, they tell a story in a way that you’re allowed to be these characters, and they are the avatars to allow you to go on these quests. That’s what it’s been for 30 years. But here, we’re really crafting a story. So the script and the story are going to tell us a lot about who these characters need to be. What makes Mario Mario? What makes Luigi Luigi? How are they separate? What’s their relationship? What is the relationship with their parents? What’s the relationship with their family? What are the circumstances of their lives that are calling them on their quest? Once you know all those things, that kind of makes it easy.

Charlie Day Luigi

You approach it from emotion, which is slightly different from, “Hey, what’s the funniest way to say ‘It’s-a me?’” Instead, you’re saying, “Why am I saying this to my brother? What do I care about? What am I feeling in this moment?” You start from that place, and then you build out.

Seth Rogen Donkey Kong

I only do one voice, and it’s my voice, so it was not a hard process.

Action Reborn

How bringing a former Devil May Cry 5 combat designer onboard to develop Final Fantasy XVI's action was destiny

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Final Fantasy XVI represents a big shift for the series; it's easily the most action-oriented mainline game in the series yet. After playing the game for roughly two hours earlier this year, I was impressed with how well this fast-paced action works for a mainline Final Fantasy.

Anyone familiar with the series is likely aware that it's been nearly two decades since Final Fantasy X, arguably the last true turn-based mainline entry. Since then, the series has slowly moved towards real-time action, morphing through Final Fantasy XII's MMO-like combat, Final Fantasy XIII's active time battles, and culminating in Final Fantasy XV and VII Remake's straight-up action combat. Even though its being developed by Creative Business Unit III, most well known for making FFXIV, an MMORPG, FFXVI is taking this action another step further, playing more like Devil May Cry than Final Fantasy.

Ryota Suzuki has nearly 20 years of experience working at Capcom, specifically on combat for games like Marvel vs. Capcom 2 and Devil May Cry 5. He left Capcom years ago, ready to strike out on a new adventure, and now, he's the combat director for FFXVI. I interviewed Suzuki, FFXVI producer Naoki Yoshida, and director Hiroshi Takai about how this team-up came to be.

The trio says it can be summed up in one word: destiny.

"The trial that you played today was something we'd worked on from pre-production," Takai tells me. "We spent around two years creating this, and we got to a point where it's like, 'Okay, this is really good, and now if we take this and we brush it up, and we flesh it out, and we create more things like this, we can finally finish our game.' But at that point we didn't know if what we had [in the battle system] was good enough. And also, our team was without a core member that could really create something like this, and so we're in this position where, 'Okay, we want to take this that we have, and we want to make it into a game, but we really don't have anyone to lead us there. What do we do?'"

In steps Suzuki – or rather, a friend of Suzuki.

Takai says, "It just so happened that a friend of both Suzuki-san and myself [said], 'I know this guy; he's thinking of leaving his current company and maybe getting into something else. And he is a master of action games. Would you be interested in talking to him?'" Takai said yes.

"At Capcom, I had worked for almost 20 years and was pretty much only doing action games and 2D fighting games," Suzuki says. "After finishing work on Devil May Cry 5, I started thinking about my career and moving forward, asking myself questions like, 'I'm someone that's spent my whole career only working on these types of games. Would another company or another team need a person like me with my skill set? Does my skill set resonate with other developers? Is it needed outside of Capcom?' And I wanted answers to that."

"'I can only make action games,'" Suzuki told Takai. "'You're at Square Enix. You make role-playing games. Do you even need a person like me?' And Takai-san, who knew what we were creating, was like, 'You're exactly the guy that we need.'"

Suzuki was surprised, he says, because he's always looked at Square Enix "as this company that, again, really, really excels at making RPGs" rather than action games. But the more he considered it, the more he thought his action experience and Square Enix's RPG experience would make for a "really good combination" because he could "bring something new to this company."

With laughter, Takai says he told Suzuki that yes, "this is definitely the type of person we need to work on this project that I can tell you nothing about." He then asked Suzuki for a couple of days so that he could speak with Yoshida about this prospective designer.

"I went back to talk with my producer [Yoshida] and basically told him, 'We found him; we found the guy that does exactly what we need for this project. Can you meet with them and bring them over to the company?' And so Yoshida-san went down to meet with him immediately."

Yoshida said that after talking to Takai, he hopped on a plane to fly from Tokyo, Japan, to Osaka, where Capcom's headquarters is located.

"I basically said, 'Hi, I'm Naoki Yoshida; we want you on our team. We're going to be making Final Fantasy XVI, and it's going to be an action game, and we want you to create our battle system. We want you to use this as a springboard for your career. Here's how much money we can give you. What do you think?'"

And the rest was history.

"So when you look at it, it just happened to be that we were creating the first action Final Fantasy game ever," Yoshida says. "It just happened to be that this person with a 20-year career at Capcom was looking to get into something new. And it just happened to be that both of them had the same friend that introduced him at the right time. And so, in that sense, it was destiny."

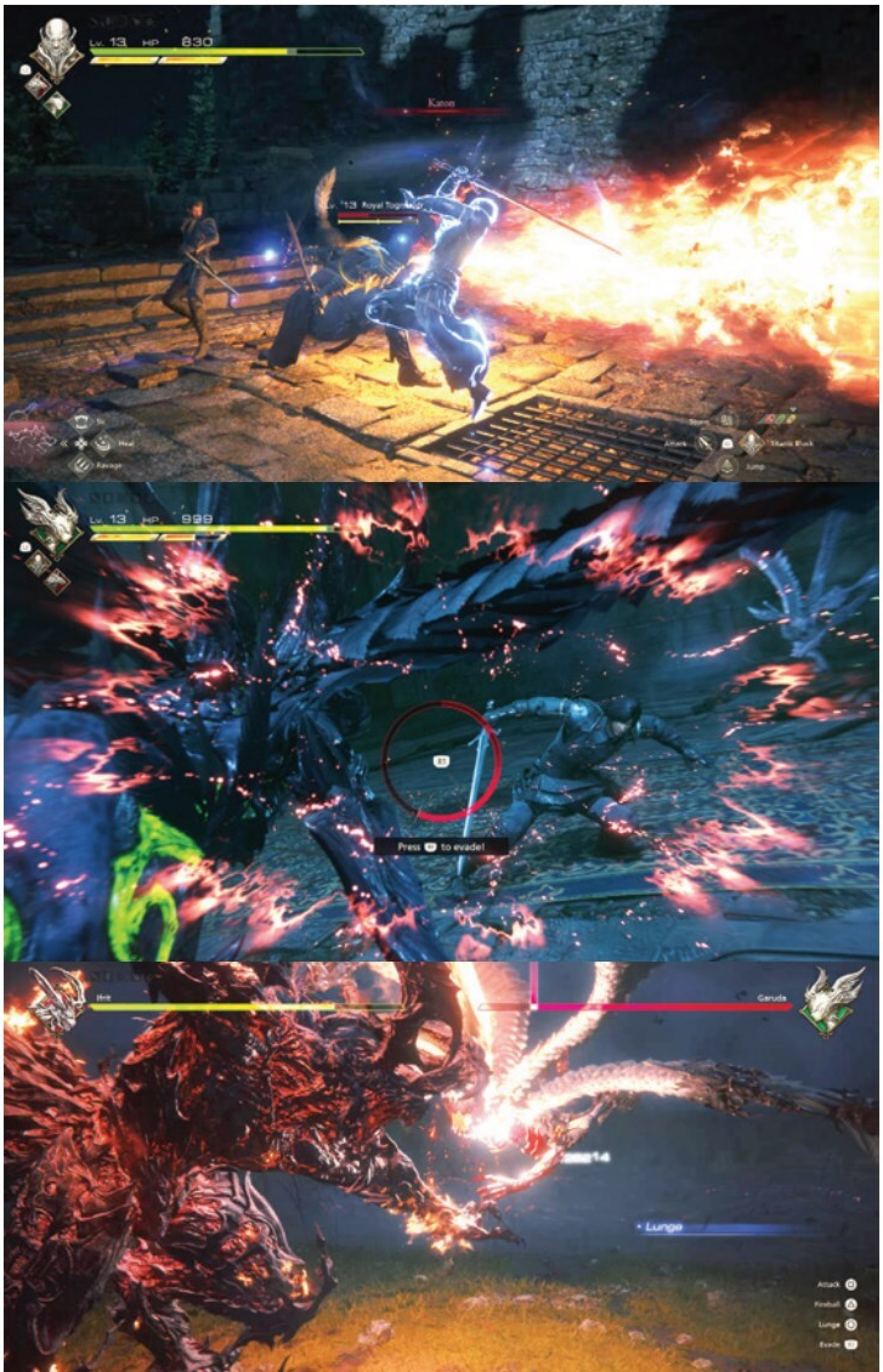
Suzuki says he is incredibly proud to be able to take his 20 years of experience at Capcom and put all of that into Final Fantasy XVI.

"I think it's my best work ever." ■

Ryota Suzuki
Combat Director

Naoki Yoshida
Producer

Hiroshi Takai
Director



OPINION

Goodbye, Gamepad

A farewell to the Wii U eShop, and why it shouldn't be forgotten

BY CHARLES HARTE

December 25, 2013, was the day I finally got my hands on a Wii U. It was a special edition that came with a code for Wind Waker HD and a gamepad emblazoned with a golden Triforce. For my brother and I, 11 and 13 at the time, respectively, this was a massive deal; we'd spent the last year seeing Wii Us at friends' houses, yearning for our own, and struggling to explain the difference between it and our current Wii to our parents.

But while it was valuable to us, the Wii U struggled to sell and has ultimately gone down as one of Nintendo's most disappointing consoles. This March, the system's eShop shut down forever, permanently closing a chapter of Nintendo's history.

I'll be the first to admit that the rosy lenses of nostalgia heavily tint my memory of the Wii U, but I think some defense of the device is still warranted. Gamer culture has been so quick to forget the worst parts of the console that the best parts have also been lost in the mix. As much as I love my Switch, there are lots of lessons it could learn from its older, clumsier brother, especially when it comes to the eShop.

The Wii U had character. On startup, Miis linked to profiles posed and danced. On the home screen, floaty synth pads and bells played arpeggios and echoing harmonies. Miis stood in huddles by (now defunct) Miiverse icons, chatting about their respective games. The vibe continued in the eShop. Even the loading screen is a minigame where your console's software icons become a puzzle you have to piece together. Once you're in, you can listen to a whole lineup of bouncy bossa bops while you browse. The music in these menus never reached the iconic status of the Wii's Mii Channel or Wii Shop Channel, but the influence is clear. It's an energetic, childlike aura that feels distinctly Nintendo.

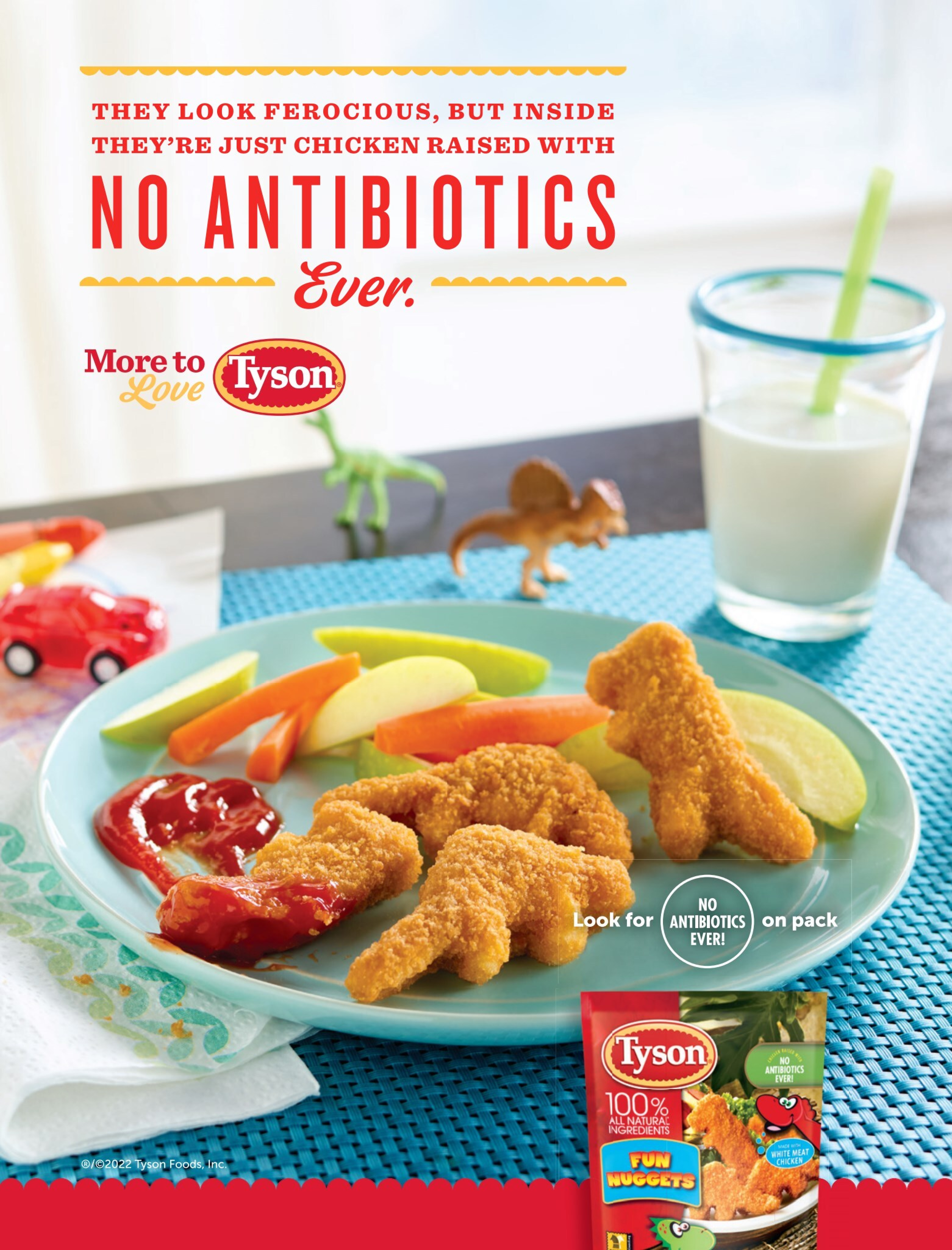
By comparison, the Switch's menus are bland. There's no music anywhere, and while the "themes" section in the settings seemed to imply a return of the 3DS' visual themes, six years later our only options are still "black" and "white." It's much less charming, something I considered essential to a Nintendo product before its release.

While I'll certainly miss the Wii U eShop's fantastic vibes, the real despair I feel is from losing access to its games library. The Wii U's two-screen setup allows it to run a ton of virtual console games, and to people used to buying these games on the secondhand market, the prices were shockingly affordable. All Game Boy Advance games were under $10, and Metroid Prime Trilogy, which can easily go for over $100 on eBay, was only $20. It was also the only place you could digitally buy DS games, like Pokémon Ranger and Kirby: Squeak Squad.

Older Nintendo fans likely see this as an opportunity to revisit games from their past, but for someone my age, it's how I experienced many of Nintendo's classics. Paper Mario, Ocarina of Time, and Super Mario 64 are all games I would never have experienced without the eShop's virtual console.

In theory, those games exist on the Switch, but because they're locked behind Nintendo Switch Online's classics library, you lose access if your subscription ends. You do not own them, and one day, like the Wii U, Nintendo will shut down the Switch's online features. It's unclear what happens to the classics library when that happens. While the Wii U's eShop might be shutting down, I can at least find comfort in the fact that I own the classics I bought, and I always will.

The Wii U was a valuable window to Nintendo's past, both with its charm and its virtual console, and the eShop's closure is the final nail in its coffin. Nintendo is removing something it doesn't have a real replacement for. I understand that the Wii U wasn't the console for everyone, but it was the console for me. And while some people are unbothered by the ending of its final chapter, laughing at its clunky design and mocking the gamepad, I don't mind. At the end of the day, it'll always be my childhood Christmas treasure – and for now, the only console that can play Wind Waker HD. ■


THEY LOOK FEROCIOUS, BUT INSIDE THEY'RE JUST CHICKEN RAISED WITH
NO ANTIBIOTICS
Ever.
More to Love
Tyson
Look for
NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER!
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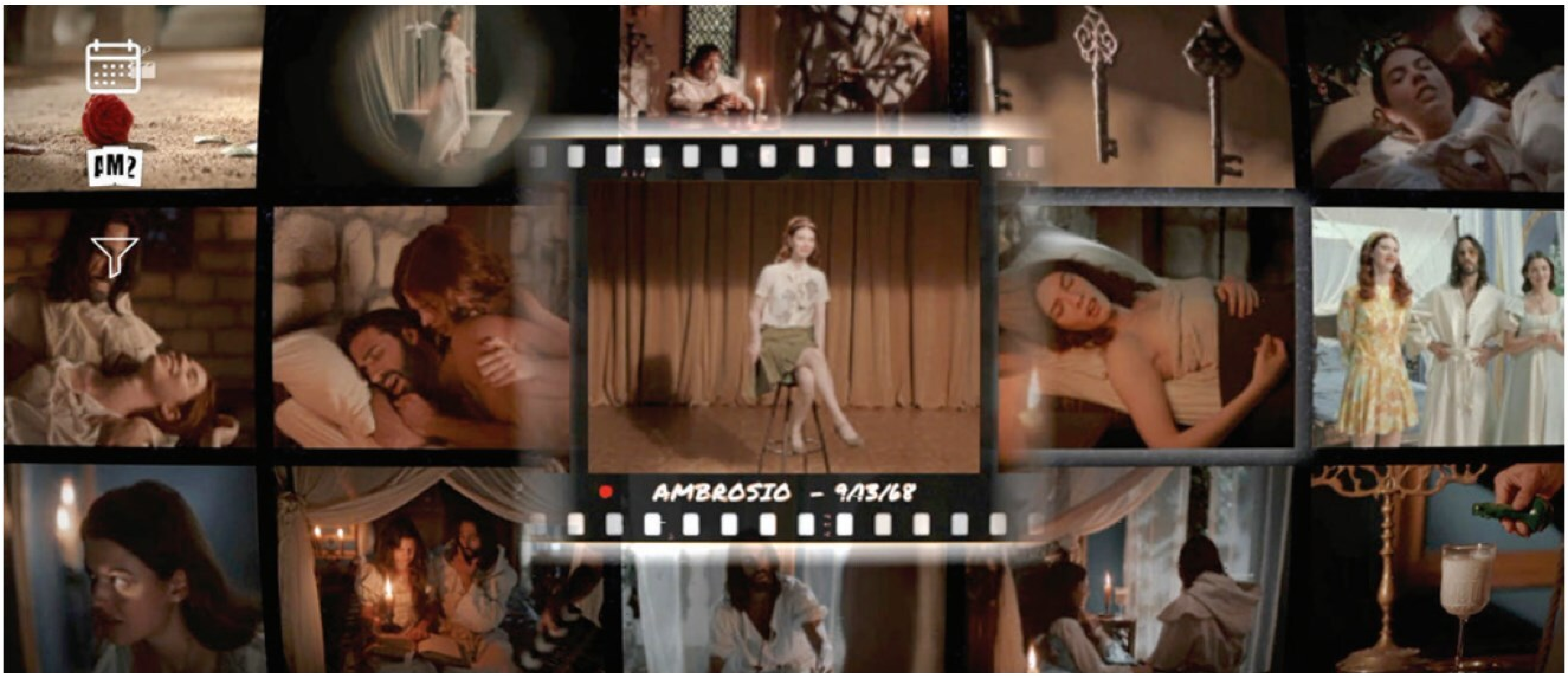
The Making of Immortality

The film history that inspired Sam Barlow's latest game

BY LEWIS PACKWOOD



“ONE OF MY INITIAL REFERENCES FOR THE PROJECT WAS: it'd be cool to make a video game that is, maybe not as indulgent, but as ambitious and messy as a Ken Russell movie,” says Sam Barlow, referencing the director of *Women in Love* and *The Devils*. Indeed, Immortality is by far the most ambitious game Barlow has made since he left British developer Climax Studios to go solo in 2014. His first game, Her Story, was a critical and commercial success on its release in 2015, and the follow-up, Telling Lies, shared similar acclaim in 2019. But Immortality, although it uses a similar mechanic of piecing together the story from fragments of video, is dramatically more layered, complex, and above all, cinematic than its predecessors.

Sam Barlow
CEO of Half Mermaid Productions

Immortality centers around the fictional actor Marissa Marcel, who starred in three films in 1968, 1970, and 1999, which were never released. As the player, you must watch footage from all three and determine why. “I've always been fascinated by lost movies,” says Barlow, adding that he obsessively watched and thought about feature films growing up. From our conversation, it's clear he has a deep, almost encyclopedic knowledge of cinema, as he drops in anecdotes about long-dead directors and the shifting fortunes of Hollywood.

The first of the three films, *Ambrosio*, has similarities to *The Devils* and Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* – but Barlow was wary of aping these films too closely, he says, because they're too good. Instead, he wanted to create a film that felt like the movies Alfred Hitchcock or Otto Preminger were making in the twilights of their careers, a film shot in a studio in the classic Hollywood style at a period when such things had begun to feel old-fashioned. Something similar to *St. Joan*, the first film in which Otto Preminger directed Jean Seberg, and which Barlow says is “not a great movie, even though it was based on a fantastic play.” Barlow wanted to reflect the disturbing way the domineering, 50-something Preminger "sculpted" the naïve 17-year-old Seberg into the star he wanted.

The film itself is based on an 18th-century novel about the corruption of a devout monk called Ambrosio. "It is 100% a film noir story," says Barlow. "The monk is essentially a cop; he's this authority figure who is upholding the moral high ground, and along comes the femme fatale Matilda, who then proceeds to ruin him." Barlow says he's fascinated by the perverse way that, under the old Hollywood studio system, actresses, in particular, had very little power but often played powerful femme fatale roles. "You go back and watch those performances now, and those characters actually have a ton of agency. They're the ones that are making the story happen, they have a ton of sexual agency, they get to enjoy themselves – and they usually win."

The second film, *Minsky*, reflects the dawning of the New Hollywood era when directors and actors had far more freedom as the old studio system began to break down. It's an erotic thriller along the lines of 1971's *Klute* starring Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland. "There's this parallel between [the actress] Jean Seberg and Jane Fonda," says Barlow. "Whereas Jane Fonda kind of grew and went from strength to strength, Jean Seberg did not." Barlow wanted to reflect the complexity of New Hollywood, where there wasn't an even distribution of this newfound freedom. "You got rid of all of the issues and the power dynamics of the studio system, [but] you now have the system where the directors, in theory, wielded more power, and were also controlling the actresses, and probably also sleeping with them."

Barlow wrote the script for *Ambrosio* himself, but to make *Minsky* feel more like an authentic '70s movie, he drafted in Allan Scott, the screenplay writer for the acclaimed 1973 thriller *Don't Look Now*. Barlow loved the script, except for the finale. "It was a very happy ending, which surprised me a lot. So I tweaked that. I don't think I've seen any '70s movies in this genre that have a happy ending."

The third and final film is called *Two of Everything*, and again, Half Mermaid drafted a Hollywood screenwriter to create the script: Barry Gifford, the co-writer of David Lynch's 1997 movie *Lost Highway*. The studio gave both Scott and Gifford a broad plot outline for each film; in the case of *Two of Everything*, Half Mermaid told Gifford to aim for a '90s neo-noir along the lines of *The Bodyguard* meets *The Double Life of Véronique*. But, says Barlow, "we didn't tell them much of anything about the real game and what was really going on."

Another big influence for *Two of Everything* was *Eyes Wide Shut*, the movie Stanley Kubrick worked on when he died. "He literally worked himself to death," says Barlow, who remembers reading about how Kubrick was so exhausted during shooting that he collapsed outside his house before he could reach the front door. He sees parallels with Marissa's tale, where she struggles to make one final film amid ailing health – the struggle to leave something behind when she's gone. "The seeking of immortality through creating art," as Barlow puts it. He also sees parallels between struggles in his life and the three years he spent trying to make Legacy of Kain: Dead Sun while at Climax Studios. "I think that a lot of that Legacy of Kain residual psychic damage, of working extremely hard to try and make something very ambitious, knowing that the odds were against us, but refusing to give in ... there was definitely that in Marissa's story." ■

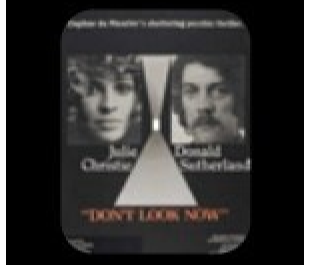
The Devils

Black Narcissus

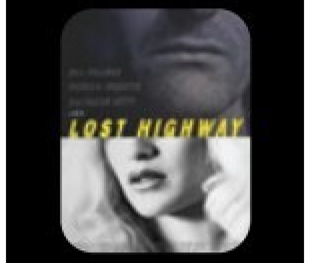
Black Narcissus

St. Joan

Klute



Don't Look Now



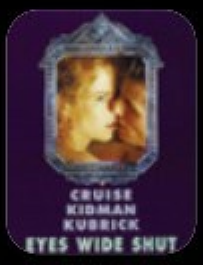
Lost Highway

THE BODYGUARD

The Bodyguard

THE DOUBLE
VÉRONIQUE

The Double Life of Véronique



Eyes Wide Shut

LIFE AND DEATH WITH IKUMI NAKAMURA

A night out in an abandoned city

BY BLAKE HESTER

"I'M ALWAYS THINKING ABOUT DEATH," Ikumi Nakamura tells me, as we ourselves are, in fact, confronted by death. It's late at night. There are no cars, people, or sounds to distract me. I can't avoid what I'm seeing: a host of creatures about to be murdered.

We're standing at a slaughterhouse. But it's a slaughterhouse in a deeply strange location, or, as Nakamura calls it, "Silicon Valley," the technology district of Shinagawa in Tokyo, Japan. As I look at trucks packed full of cows at – whether they know it or not – the end of their lives, immense skyscrapers surround us, housing tech goliaths. Sony, Cannon, and Microsoft all have offices here. The lifeblood of Japan's tech industry, all looking down at death, turned to process.

鳥じゅん
創業昭和四十二年

"The city is so new and alive, but right in the same place, there's animals being killed," Nakamura observes.

This "gap," as she often calls it – life and death, new and old – commands our conversations as we explore Shinagawa's empty streets and back alleys. If anything, the two sides of Nakamura's own life coalesced here; her old life working at Tango Gameworks leading Ghostwire: Tokyo and her new independent studio, Unseen.

After 15 years in the game industry, first working at Capcom on Ōkami, then at Platinum Games on Bayonetta and the canceled Scalebound, then Tango, Nakamura became a viral sensation with her appearance at E3 2019, joyously and nervously announcing Ghostwire. When work on the game became too stressful, Nakamura says she frequently struggled to sleep. She'd walk around Shinagawa late at night, long after the business people usually filling its streets had gone home. She'd have the city primarily to herself, just as we do now. "I discovered many things," she tells me, "and became friends with the cockroaches."

However, she left that project before its release, founding Unseen, which originally started in Shinagawa in a temporary space she shared with just four other people. The studio has since moved 20 minutes away to Tsukishima, but nevertheless, it's hard to deny the thematic appropriateness of all the new, old, life, and death of Shinigawa and how it neatly fits into Nakamura's story here.

"When I established Unseen, I felt like I had to run away from old things," she says. "From old vibes, old atmospheres. There were some people who wanted to come with me, but I left them behind. That was because I wanted to create something new, so I didn't want to bring too many old things with me."

And yet, perhaps ironically, this entire journey begins with a trip back in time, as Nakamura slides into a back alley, transporting us to what feels like a different dimension.

TRAPPED

At her request, I meet Nakamura late at night. I show up roughly between 10:30 and 11:00 p.m., and as I wait outside Shinagawa Station – one of Japan's oldest train stations, opened in 1872 – I see the final rushes of people making their way home. Eventually, Nakamura and Unseen community manager and assistant producer Kyoko, who's also helping with translation, show up, and we walk across the humongous train station.

"There's so many salarymen around here shambling around like zombies," Nakamura says as we walk past scores of men in white shirts and ties, most carrying briefcases, all looking exhausted.

On the other side of Shinagawa Station, walking past a shopping mall, we end up outside a large eating and drinking area. Honestly, it looks like many downtown areas of Tokyo these days – clean, mostly new, fairly nondescript, and indistinguishable from a million other restaurant areas in business districts. Again, it's late at night, on a weekday, no less, but a handful of people are still milling about looking for food or drink. Not too many, though, as rows of taxis wait on the street uncalled for and young women in tight clothing trying to usher people into bars stand around looking bored. We're not going to be much help to them, as before I know it, we duck into an alley behind all this boredom, slipping by a Yoshinoya fast food restaurant and a real estate company.

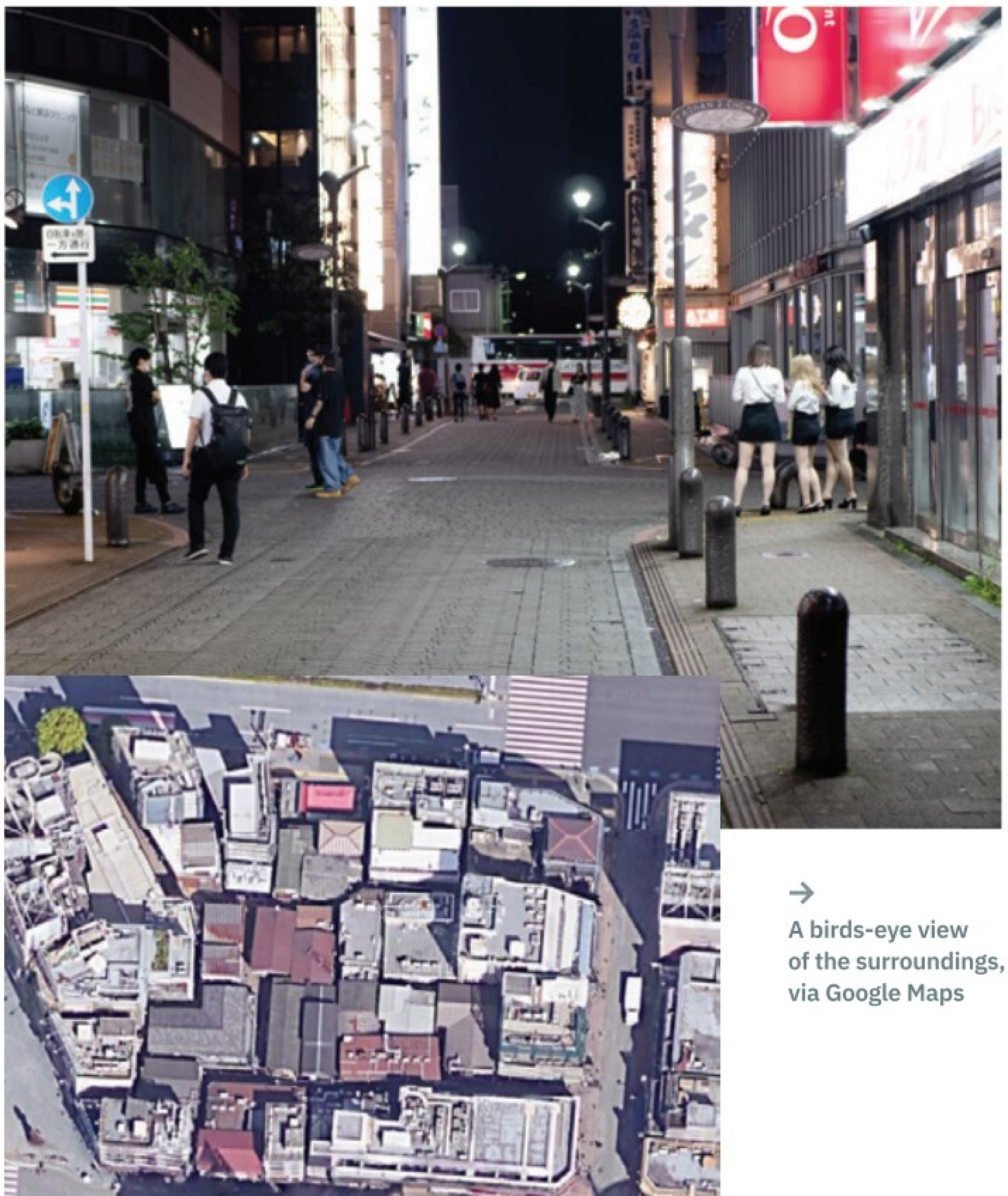
I don't know where we're going – though that's somewhat by design; as part of doing these pieces, I don't ask for specifics, letting it be a surprise – but a tight, dirty alley I can barely walk through is a bit disconcerting. Until we make our way through, and I realize there's a hidden city behind the boring storefronts on the streets. In fact, the new buildings were built surrounding an entire neighborhood back here, trapping a dozen or so extremely tightly-packed older buildings in a frame of modernity. You'd never know it from the streets, and the best way to see this weird blender of old and new is to look from above on something like Google Maps.

Our dirty alley entrance was also a sham, as once we're back here, it's incredibly clean and nice – at least compared to American alleyways. Each hidden building is roughly two-to-four stories in height, all housing little eateries and bars. This is not unlike the outside world, but crucially, I don't notice any major chains, and there's certainly no one outside begging us to drink in their empty bars like before. Back here, what establishments are still open are mainly left to their own devices. I get the idea that if you come in, great. Have a seat. If you don't, that's fine. So it goes.

This here, the way we slipped back in time, is the gap Nakamura talks about – that the old and new coexist so closely together. "I just love that gap," she says. "I like that gap, in all things, in the culture."

That gap existing, though, means the new is encroaching on the old. Like most major cities, Japan is losing part of its history as new buildings replace old ones and gentrification makes its way through the nation. Quite literally, from where we were standing just minutes before, the new blocked the old out-of-site. If I look up towards the sky, I see the skyscrapers looming over this little time capsule we're standing in – like the universe is sending me an obvious metaphor. For Nakamura, though, this is the natural order of things.

"In time, the new buildings here will grow old, and one day they'll be swapped out once again for some amazing new buildings," she says. "Long after we're gone, of course."



→
A birds-eye view of the surroundings, via Google Maps

Nakamura says she believes our environments shape us; it's why she wanted to become an environment artist earlier in her career. In fact, the first game she led, Ghostwire, was defined by its space: Tokyo. Though it's worth pointing out that now that the game is out, Nakamura says she hasn't played the final version.

She even claims to be able to picture her surroundings from a bird's eye view, visualizing how streets and buildings all connect. "Even when I'm walking around myself, it's like I've got a camera above me," she says, laughing. Considering her work and definitely evident in our conversations, it's clear Nakamura is obsessed with cities. However, she's obsessed with them in her own unique way – namely, when they're empty.

Her upcoming book, *Project UrbEx*, is a photo book chronicling her years exploring abandoned buildings around the world. Similarly, in one of her first major interviews, with the YouTube channel Archipel, she made the team follow her around various abandoned buildings in Japan. She's spent a lot of time walking around the city alone at night in her day-to-day life. "When I was working at Tango, I'd go out three or four times a week," she tells me. To that point, Ghostwire begins with all the citizens of Tokyo vanishing into thin air. Finally, when I emailed her asking if she would like to be interviewed, one of her first notes was that she wanted to meet up late at night – even floating the idea of waiting until as late as one in the morning – all so we could see one of the biggest cities in the world empty of its millions of inhabitants.

[Full disclosure: The author of this piece is working with Project UrbEx *publisher ReadOnlyMemory on a separate book. However, he is not tied to or associated with Nakamura's work with the company in any capacity.]*

And to her credit, it's a fascinating way to see an urban space – especially one as large as Tokyo. Coincidentally, I'm staying in Shinagawa for the week I'm here, but only see it during the day, when it's full of who knows how many people living, commuting, and working. This is the first time I've come out this late at night, realizing that after 10:00 p.m. or so, this place is empty. And yet, the city functions – the lights are still on; traffic stops cycle between red, yellow, and a blue shade of green; crosswalk speakers play chimes to indicate when you can cross the road. All signaling things no one is around to see or hear. At night, it feels like the city doesn't need us anymore; it's a clock we've simply wound up, and from there, it keeps itself in motion. And yet, its only functions are to serve us. She may have left Ghostwire before it came out, leaving a different director to see it through, but this is unavoidably exactly the same as the Tokyo in Ghostwire – devoid of people and yet still functioning all the same.

"You've got this city full of people; it's always moving," Nakamura says. "But at night when no one is around, when everyone is in bed asleep [...] it's like the city is alive. It gives me a strange, almost spooky feeling."

"When there's less people around, you can see and perceive the actual environment, the real city," she says.

As we walk past the alley deeper into Shinagawa, away from the handful of bars and restaurants still open, the few people surrounding us disappear. We're truly alone in this mammoth city like someone left an entire concrete jungle to us.

Well, us and a host of cows.

LIFE AND DEATH

You hear the cows before you see them. When there are no cars, trains, people, or noise pollution to drown it out, all you're left with is the sound of animals on their way to death.

The slaughterhouse takes up an entire city block. Mostly, high walls and windowless buildings block passersby from seeing and ostensibly thinking about what happens here – except for the far south side, where the walls break away to let trucks enter the facility. We're standing here, staring at trailers full of cows in the middle of the city's tech district. Maybe I'm projecting, but they look scared. It's sad.

Embarrassingly, I admit to Nakamura how scared I am of death. It's something I think about constantly. She tells me she's also always thinking about death, but with a crucial difference. "I've never been scared of dying," she says. "Even when my child was born, my feelings haven't changed." She doesn't see it as an end – the root cause of all my fear; that there's nothing beyond this. She chooses to see it as moving on.

"Maybe it's simply that there are different planes, different dimensions of existence," Nakamura says. "We're all in the same space, but we can't cross over. So for me, when I think of death, it's not dying but moving. When my father died, I didn't feel that sad because he just went somewhere else."

In her own life, Nakamura is moving on. After leaving Tango, she founded Unseen. In her previous work, she was taking direct inspiration from her home. Now that she leads a studio full of employees from around the world, she says she pulls inspiration from the various backgrounds and perspectives they bring to the table. "They're from many different countries, so I feel like I'm seeing a glimpse of their culture through their work, and that's been inspiring to me," she says. However, despite leading the company, Nakamura says she doesn't see herself as in charge of Unseen's future; she wants the company to decide together. Unseen hasn't even announced its first project, though. Time will tell what that future might be.

For now, we're taking one last look at the past. Just across the street from the slaughterhouse is about 1,300 feet of park area cut between two rows of massive office buildings, high-rises, and skyscrapers. Trees hang overhead, barely blocking out views of the buildings around us. If I were to come here in the morning, Nakamura tells me it'd look completely different. "It's zombies everywhere," she tells me. "Zombie businessmen" will be walking these same streets. In that case, it seems best to appreciate the night and the time it gives you alone with the city. "The night is all I have," Nakamura says, laughing. "A mother is only free at night."

A year back, she was in one of these buildings, starting Unseen. It wasn't long ago, but she says she feels nostalgic. That said, in life, Nakamura says she's always looking forward – which might explain why she's always thinking about death. "I don't like 'looking back' at my life," she tells me.

And while our night may have oscillated wildly between looking at the past and present, life and death, at the end of the night, the only choice left is to move forward, continuing until we, too, "move on."

We walk through Shinagawa Station, back the way we came, part ways, and go forward into the night. ■

Post-interview re-translation by Alex Highsmith
For more on Ikumi Nakamura, read our 2021 profile at GameInformer.com

BILL OF GOODS

My summer job conning people with VR **BY MATT SHORE**

IN 2003, WHEN I WAS 17 years old, I worked for a company that created virtual reality experiences for amusement parks. In a small outdoor amphitheater along the main thoroughfare of a major amusement park in Ohio, I'd act as a carnival barker, shouting bombastic adjectives at passersby for six hours to attract customers. "Come on over and try a mind-blowing virtual reality experience," I'd say. "Ride a vicious velociraptor! Fly through a bone-chilling haunted carnival! Stamp your feet and shake your hands! The sensors in the floor and ceiling can feel it! The game will register and respond to your most minuscule movement!"

Even more impressive than this supposedly cutting-edge tech was the fact some poor saps were actually swayed by a sweaty, sun-roasted teenager barking at them, enough that they paid an extra $15 not covered by the cost of entry to the park, to try our amazing VR extravaganza. Before "fear of missing out," or "FOMO," was a well-known term, I saw the phenomenon in action; as soon as one parkgoer decided to bite the bullet and slap on a headset, five or six more would shove $20 into my hands so that they, too, could pierce the veil of reality and become one with the Matrix. Once we'd gotten enough rubes saddled up with headsets strapped to their skulls, we'd flip a switch, and players were thrust into a world of adventure.

Of course, this was all bullcrap. There were no sensors in the floor or ceiling, no advanced technology to register the players' movements, and no interactivity between the players or the video displayed on their headsets. We were actively lying to customers, charging them extra to participate, and for whatever reason, they loved every minute of it. I could never tell if it was some deeply human willingness toward self-delusion or just the sunk-cost fallacy in motion. Still, a vast majority of participants stepped off the amphitheater steps with wide-eyed grins like their minds were buzzing with the possibilities afforded by this strange yet beautiful virtu-world. As a teenager with a wild imagination and a propensity for ridiculous behavior, I somehow justified this fraud as a net positive since the customers usually walked away happy. Was it really a lie or a fun carnival game that gave me a paid opportunity to practice my acting skills? Being a relative innocent, I assumed it couldn't be illegal since an adult paid me to do the work. At this point, we should be grateful that I was faking VR games rather than dropping off unmarked packages for businessmen who "seemed legit."

> **"We were actively lying to customers, charging them extra to participate, and for whatever reason, they loved every minute of it."**

Though it was fun yelling at strangers and fabricating information about invisible sensors, the real sweet spot of the gig was in the back of the amphitheater. In a cramped room that smelled like moldy costumes and Febreeze, one employee would sit between a camera and a blue screen, playing a character that appeared in the so-called game. This wasn't exactly a Disney-perfect operation, so we were given free rein to invent a character and encourage (or berate) our customers however we wanted. I recall playing a wild cowboy whose goal was to make the players shout embarrassing things, hoping their wild bellowing would attract future customers. Donning the three-dollar equivalent of a Stetson and some gas station sunglasses, I'd scream, "Woo, doggies! Hop aboard your velociraptor and slap his booty!" The players would attempt to slap their own butts in hopes that the Beast Wars-quality CGI velociraptor in the video could feel it. "This dinosaur's name is Poncho! When you want him to speed up, yell 'Go, Poncho, Go!'" There was no rule against naming the velociraptor after my father's childhood chihuahua, and nothing drew a crowd like a bunch of people in headsets swinging imaginary lassos above their heads before suddenly switching to jazz hands.

We had a few safety measures in place for whenever someone seemingly caught on to the grift. If a grumpy dad or grandpa would cross their arms, mouth obscenities at the game, or otherwise refuse to participate, the person in the back could see them on a closed-circuit camera. "Hey, you in the Hawaiian shirt! You're not flailing your arms like an orangutan! That means you're in last place! Everyone, boo them!" Nothing encouraged participation like public shaming. Even the most cantankerous player started stamping their feet or doing the Macarena once everyone around them was hissing.

If this seems cruel or arbitrary, just know it was all for a good cause: my personal enjoyment. And though the game was just a pre-recorded video that displayed the same information no matter what the players did, I made sure to reward whichever player followed my commands most fervently (or whoever looked the funniest while dancing like an overstimulated Muppet). The arbitrarily-decided winner of the game was awarded a round of applause from their comrades and literally nothing else. This momentary ego boost was enough for most winners, though, who strutted away like they'd been crowned Miss America. The "VR" experience brought such joy to all involved that I would have done it forever – if the company hadn't suddenly stopped scheduling us and gone radio silent. My manager told me it had gone bankrupt, but I never got any follow-up on what happened. It seemed strange! They had such a solid business model. If you believe in karma, just know I'm still waiting on those last few paychecks. ■

ESSAY

Shenmue is a Beautiful Grief Simulator

For one father, Yu Suzuki's magnum opus mirrors real life

BY JAMES TOCCHIO

In the 22 years since Shenmue's debut, I've played the game 23 times. Twenty-three times I've lived the life of protagonist Ryo Hazuki, watched his father die, and navigated his world and experiences. Each time I've realized something new about the game, the people who made it, or something new about myself.

Playthrough 23 was the most poignant of them all. I saw, noticed, and felt things I hadn't in any other, and it's given me a new appreciation for Yu Suzuki and Sega's AM2 development team.

More than anything else, Shenmue is a video game about how a real person in a real world inhabited by other real people experiences the death of a loved one and the loneliness that follows.

Content warning for discussion of death and the loss of a child

In the fall of 2020, my wife and I lost a baby. He was named Henry, and he died before taking his first breath. It was no one's fault; just bad luck or some undetectable condition. No one knows. But my son was gone, and his death was devastating for my wife and I.

To be confronted by the death of someone so young and innocent was disorienting in ways I could never have predicted. I'd lost something irreplaceable and wasn't ready for what came next.

I spent every hour of every day thinking about Henry and death. I dwelt upon what I'd lost. I projected my worry into the future and onto my two daughters, aged 4 and 6. An oily fist gripped my heart. What if there was another unexplainable twist of fate? What if something happened to my girls, too? We were in the middle of a pandemic then, and it was impossible to get through a day without thinking of death.

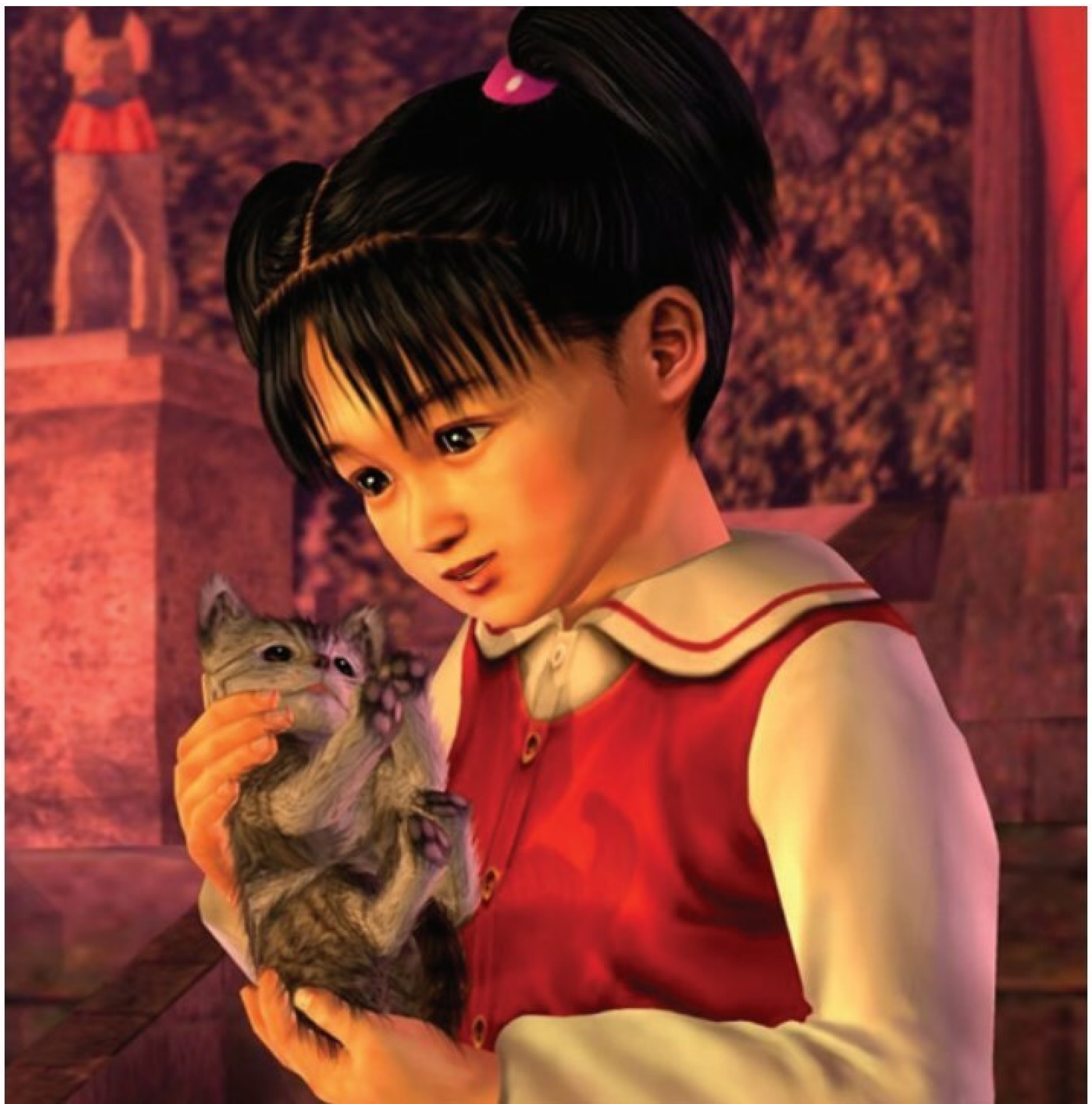
With sinister subtlety, the grief and anxiety morphed into depression. Relentless sadness overwhelmed me as I struggled to understand these new feelings and to function despite them. For the first time in my life, I suffered panic attacks.

I hit rock bottom. I found a psychiatrist. Through months of work, I came to understand and break the cycle of catastrophizing, a destructive phenomenon in which those who have suffered trauma obsessively focus on their worst fears and believe that those fears will inevitably come true.

I've emerged into a better place. I feel healthy now, and while I still think of Henry every day, I no longer think of him so morbidly, nor do I constantly fear the unthinkable.

It was through the lens of these experiences that I viewed my latest playthrough of Shenmue.

Players can choose to care for this abandoned kitten after learning it has lost its parents ↓



Shenmue opens with an arresting cinematic. Protagonist Ryo Hazuki helplessly witnesses the murder of his father, Iwao, by a mysterious man in Chinese robes. Before dying in Ryo's arms, Iwao gives his son one last piece of paternal advice.

"Keep friends, those you love, close to you."

Iwao dies, and Ryo is left with his grief.

From here, the player takes control. Shenmue is a sandbox game, an early open-world life sim. Like all good life sims, the player chooses how to live. We can play the game and ignore the theme – that unmanaged grief will consume us – or we can pay attention.

Early on, we meet a young girl named Megumi at the neighborhood shrine, carefully attending to a hurt kitten. The kitten is like Ryo; the same men who killed Ryo's dad made it an orphan. As it sped from Ryo's house, their car struck and killed the kitten's mother. The kitten is also symbolic of Ryo's grief.

The player can choose to help the little girl nurse the kitten back to health or not. This decision and its consequences are never explicitly presented. But if we help, we're treated to interesting character developments.

Ryo and Megumi form a friendship. The kitten gets stronger. Nozomi, Ryo's would-be girlfriend, also appears and helps the kitten; in these moments, we learn more about Ryo's relationship with Nozomi. If we continue paying attention to the cat's health, we can find it wholly healed near the end of the game. In a happy turn, Megumi's family adopts her. The kitten has found a new family and new happiness.

In the 22 years since Shenmue's release, plenty of people have commented on the supposed absurdity that Ryo would pause for even a moment to pet a cat, buy capsule toys, or play video games at the local arcade in the middle of his quest to avenge his father.

But that's wrong.

Something happens when we're adrift in a sea of grief. We're soaked in it. Our lives are saturated with it, and nothing is untouched by it. When I lost my son, I found myself grasping for anything offering even the slightest buoyancy.

I planted a willow tree, and my wife and daughters painted the name of my lost son on a rock that we placed at its trunk. I gently rubbed between my finger and thumb the willow's leaves. I smelled the blossoms and ached to think of my wife's pain. I spent days cultivating a surrounding garden. I sat on a bench there and stared for hours. I held the cold rock with Henry's name on it and cried when no one was looking.

One day I recalled the Game Boy games I loved as a child: Kirby's Dream Land, Link's Awakening, Donkey Kong Land, and many more. I bought them all on eBay. I amassed a collection of distracting trinkets – my own capsule toys.

I wrote essays. I learned how to solder and fixed my broken Virtual Boy. I became obsessed with making the grass of my lawn greener and healthier than it was the year before. I invented new hobbies and abandoned them weeks later in pursuit of others. I pretended everything was fine; from the outside, everything must have appeared so.

But every morning, I beat back panic attacks, and every day I cried and told no one.

The many diversions of Shenmue do not undermine the importance of Ryo's grief. These are things that happen when one is lost in grief.

I believe Shenmue's creators understood this. After all, the Shenmue soundtrack contains songs poignantly titled "The Sadness I Carry on My Shoulders" and "Daily Agony."

Other criticisms often poke fun at the stilted dialogue of the game's NPCs. And while some of it is, yes, simply bad acting, there's also a beautiful realism in how many NPCs react to the death of Iwao and his living son.

During one missable scripted scene, Ryo's two friends from school visit him at home. They joke and laugh, but there's an uncomfortable subtext. They want their friend back. They urge Ryo to go back to being a normal kid. He deflects their kindness and assures them that everything is okay. They leave Ryo's house a bit deflated.

Later in the game, Nozomi tries to get Ryo to share his feelings with her. She practically begs him to do so, gently implying that even the slightest outreach will result in her happily altering the very course of her life. She'll stay in Japan to be with him, to help him, rather than follow her plan to attend college in Canada.

But he doesn't reach out. His grief prevents it.

Shenmue's NPCs act as real people act. They're concerned, sad, and uncomfortable. They don't know what to say, and they wish everything could just go back to normal. And Ryo acts as a real person does. He's withdrawn and sad and alone, even amongst friends. He struggles silently, carries the burden, and watches, paralyzed in grief, as his friends and the people he loves diminish into the distance.

Iwao Hazuki died hoping that Ryo would keep his friends and those he loves close to him. Instead, because he can't process his grief, Ryo spends the entire game unwittingly pushing everyone away.

All of this happens in Shenmue as it happens in life. It happened when my wife and I lost the baby.

When someone dies, people don't know what to say. Some friends and acquaintances avoid the subject entirely. Some extend their condolences and then push to resume normal life as quickly as possible. Some manufacture a cloying theatrical sympathy, while others genuinely try to do anything they can to help.

↘ Finding this blossoming cherry tree at the end of Shenmue II represents a new beginning of sorts for Ryo, even though he's not ready to abandon his revenge mission

Each of these well-meaning responses is equally abrasive. Nothing that anyone said could change anything. There was no answer. Nothing could repair the loss. That's death. It's permanent. And those who suffer often do so, as we did, as Ryo does, with a reassuring smile.

What's remarkable about Shenmue, especially when recalling that the game debuted in 2000, when very few games approached serious subject matter with care and attention, is how the game handles it all deftly. There's a rare lightness of touch. So light, it seems, that it's possible to miss the game's message for 22 playthroughs.

Ryo is a kid in pain. He has no real power. He can't fix what happened, and he can't achieve what he thinks will heal him. He never feels better. There is no victory. By the end of Shenmue, everything's gone wrong. Without his knowing it, Ryo's grief has destroyed everything good in his life.

His plans to go to college have been cast aside to pursue ill-conceived revenge. He's lost a girl who loves him completely. His friends have given up on him. They've painfully said their goodbyes and gone on to walk their own paths. Though all these people care about Ryo deeply, he's pushed them so far away that they're now beyond reach. He ends the game entirely alone.

This resolution is another tragic way in which Shenmue can mirror real life.

Shenmue's plot moves forward in the game's sequels, but the story is unfinished. I don't know what happens to Ryo. I don't know if he realizes his mistakes and heeds his father's dying words, or if he falls deeper into the loneliness of his loss and grief.

But it is perhaps fitting that the series hasn't concluded, that the story isn't over. Death and grief have no ending for those of us who lose someone we love. There is no satisfying conclusion. There's nothing to do except hold hands with the grief and go on.

But if we're smart, we remember the vital lesson that Ryo forgets: to keep those we love close to us. ■

GEAR

STEPPING OUT

Take your love of gaming out of the gaming room

BY MATT MILLER

1 NEBULA CAPSULE 3 LASER PROJECTOR

This tiny projector packs a punch far outstripping its size, standing under 7 inches tall. The Capsule 3 supplies a straightforward way to take your games or movies into the backyard, camping trip, or anywhere else you might wish. You can plug in if power is available, but it can also run off internal batteries when needed. The 1080p native resolution handles HDR admirably. Importantly for our purposes, it also includes a built-in game mode that reduces lag (at the cost of some brightness) to entirely acceptable levels for anything but serious competitive play. A built-in 8-watt speaker is a welcome inclusion, but it's easy to plug in your own external speakers if you're looking for more impressive audio options. Simple to use and featuring excellent picture quality, it's a great choice for portable visuals.

$800 | *us.seenebula.com*

2 LION TREK PORTABLE SOLAR GENERATOR

Whether you're looking for a remote charging solution or you even want to plug in a TV while traveling outdoors, the sturdy Lion Trek offers up to 150W output to its AC, USB, or USB-C outlets. Chargeable via standard AC wall outlet or solar power (with sold separate panels), the small form factor, light weight (a little over two pouds), and consistent performance make this a deceptively mighty option for power on the go.

$230 | *lionenergy.com*

3 SONOS MOVE

The Move speaker features a rich soundscape with notably punchy bass, and the built-in Trueplay functionality adapts to the space you are using it. Beyond stellar audio production, the big advantage of a Sonos speaker is its shared wireless ecosystem, which makes it easy to add new rooms and locations to a full home setup of other Sonos products. Within that ecosystem, the Move functions as an exemplary single-room speaker but has the advantage of portability into the backyard (or further) when needed. Strong battery life (after charging on the included cradle) and impressive weatherproofing mean you needn't worry about the occasional rainstorm or splash from the pool. It connects via WiFi while you're still in range but functions as a more-than-capable Bluetooth speaker when out and about.

$399 | *sonos.com*

❹ HOT WHEELS: RIFT RALLY

From Velan Studios, the developer of MarioKart Live, this mixed-reality game includes an actual remote control car that you drive and stunt through your own house, driveway, or other hard surfaces while controlling it onscreen. The family-targeted experience provides a genuine sense of speed in the app, even if size scale differences mean the actual car isn't careening uncontrollably across your kitchen, which is probably good. While the video game isn't going to compete with modern racers, it's still great fun setting up the included gate tracks and seeing your home space transformed into a snowy blizzard or rutted rally track. Most players are likely to prefer to play on a phone or tablet. However, the digital component can also run on a PS4 or PS5 for a bigger display at the expense of chasing the car around (which is part of the fun). ■

$130 | *riftrally.com*

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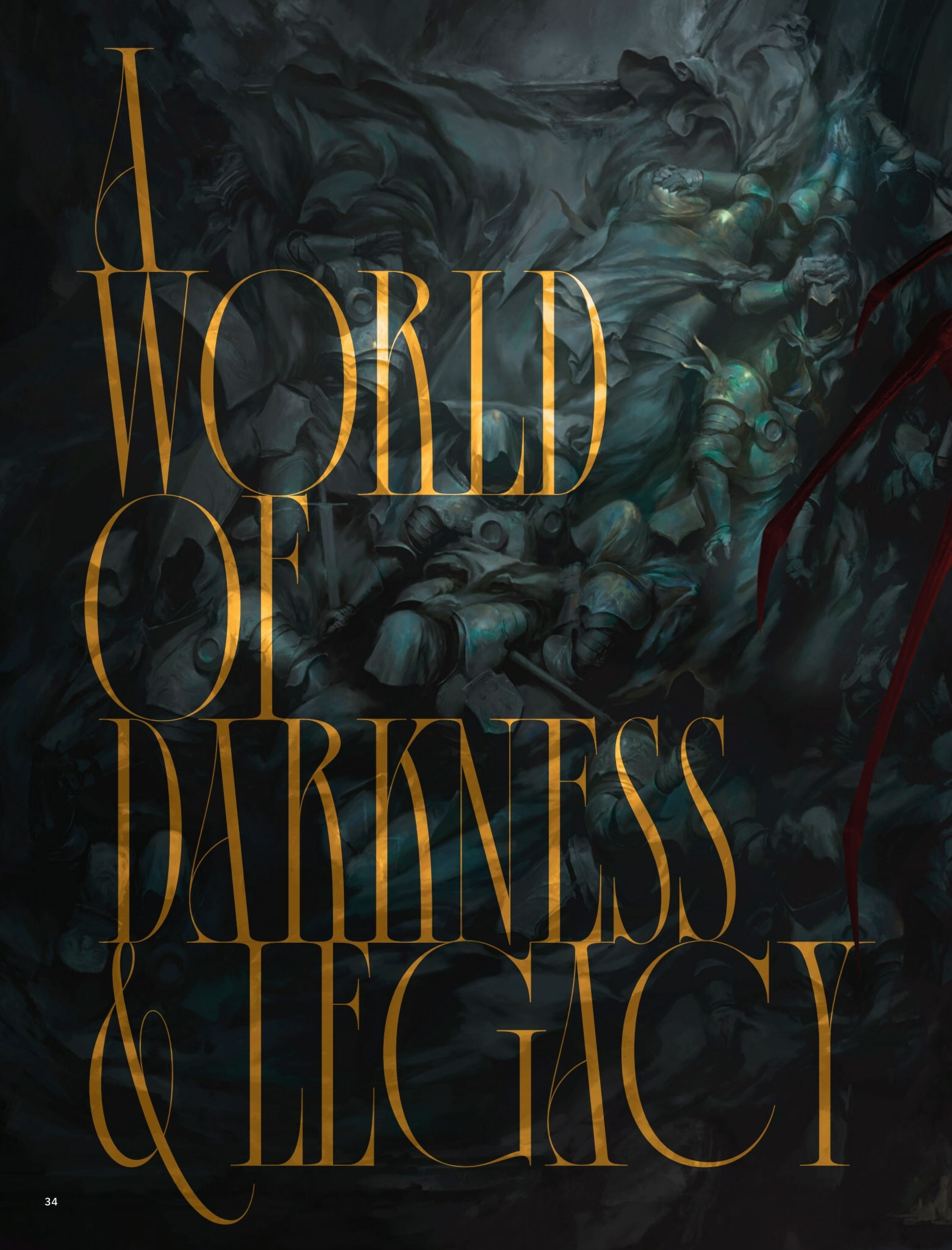
A WORLD OF DARKNESS & LEGACY



A FINAL TOUR OF DIABLO IV'S ENDGAME

BY MARCUS STEWART

Excited Diablo fans pack a Blizzcon convention hall in 2019, eyes glued to the stage for an announcement they've waited years for. After several tense minutes, a countdown appears across the fleet of monitors, and the audience enthusiastically chants each number as it arrives. Their wish comes early as the timer unexpectedly expires at "4". The room darkens, and a beautifully rendered cinematic begins.

Eyes widen as they witness a band of hapless treasure hunters manipulated into releasing the demon Lilith, daughter of hatred and creator of the world of Sanctuary, from her prison. Their disturbing deaths to fuel this cause offers the first emphatic example of one of Diablo 4's main pillars: a return to the violent darkness that defined the first two entries.

Through hell, fire, and brimstone, Blizzard has crafted Diablo IV to celebrate the series' past and be a benchmark for its future. Sanctuary has become a gigantic shared world inhabited by thousands of players trekking alone or working together to stop Lilith's plan of dominating this fragile bastion of humanity. And even after this primary campaign concludes, a wealth of post-game content awaits that will challenge players in exciting new ways. Diablo IV's launch may end a long development road, but it's only the beginning of a grander journey into darkness.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** June 6

ENVISIONING A HELLSCAPE

The wheels for Diablo IV started spinning as Blizzard wrapped up work on Diablo III's Reaper of Souls expansion. The studio felt good about what it accomplished over that game's life cycle, particularly its improvements to combat and its positively received rollout of seasonal content updates. In addition to retaining and improving those features, Blizzard reexamined Diablo 1 and 2 to identify their defining elements. By marrying these characteristics with Diablo 3's signature features, the recipe for the fourth entry began to take shape.

"Looking back at Diablo 1, [the] game had great mood and atmosphere," says associate game director Joseph Piepiora. "This dark setting where the player's alone in the world. They're delving deep beneath the church, you know, they're fighting skeletons, they're fighting undead, they're fighting demons [...] Diablo II injected this extra level of character customization where you could really make very intricate builds between items that could drop in the game world and interactions with the talent tree, that was very new at the time as a general game mechanic [...] Diablo III had that action-combat element that we loved. We thought that went really, really well."

From the get-go, the team also aimed to create a more contiguous and expansive version of Sanctuary, allowing fans to explore more than ever before. Engendering increased player freedom to wander around and battle enemies at a pleasing cadence was an important pillar that, according to Piepiora, "took a lot of time to get right." The same was true of designing an open world that could still direct players toward Diablo IV's most extraordinary sights when necessary and prevent them from getting lost.

Blizzard took the divide-and-conquer approach to realize this ambitious scope by assembling smaller strike teams within the studio focused on crafting individual elements. These semi-autonomous squads contain various disciplines, including writers, producers, quest designers, artists, and engineers, assigned to crafting content for each of Diablo's regions. That includes a zone's monster families, side quests, dungeons, and more. Strike teams also formulated more specific elements, such as a character class. This approach allows each aspect of the game to receive focused attention and come together in a more streamlined manner while still ensuring a collaborative, unified vision.

That cooperation matters because, as is often easy to forget about many game studios, Blizzard is ultimately made up of fans as enthusiastic as their audience. And creating a system that ensures full consideration of the collective opinions of these diehard Diablo players only benefits the final package – the ultimate Diablo game made for fans by fans.

We've learned much about Diablo IV in the years since its reveal. The adventure unfolds decades after the previous game across Sanctuary, the mortal realm created and fostered by rogue angels and demons to escape the never-ending conflict between Heaven and Hell. The angel named Inarius and his lover, the demon Lilith, gave birth to humanity's ancestors, the Nephalem, but Lilith is banished after betraying Inarius' cause.

Now that she's back, it's up to the protagonist to stop her from reclaiming Sanctuary and the hearts of humanity as her own.

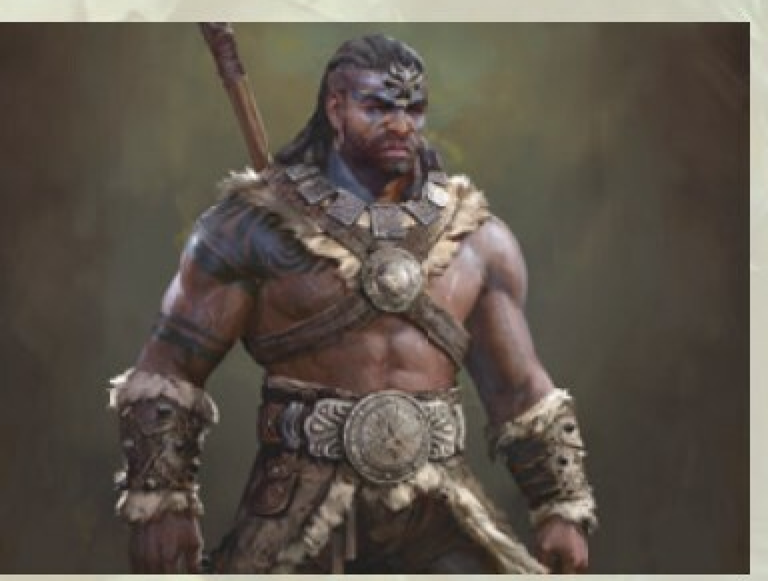
Players assume the role of a customizable hero sporting one of five classes – Barbarian, Sorceress, Rogue, Necromancer, and Druid – to pursue Lilith across five large regions (see sidebar for a primer on each class). These include the frigid terrain of Fractured Peaks, the damp highlands of Scosglen, the arid desert Kehjistan, the poisonous swamps of Hawezar, and the rocky grasslands of the Dry Steppes. Diablo IV's seamless open-world design lets players freely explore these dense, biodiverse lands. Monster families, such as legions of Drowned terrorizing the coasts of Scosglen or Hawezar's resident snake-like menace, the Nangari, serve as painful welcoming parties to all who dare enter. Best of all, the non-linear mission design means players can visit these locations in any order to progress the story as they see fit.

Many fans have had the opportunity to explore Diablo IV in two weekend-long betas in March. They've familiarized themselves with the game's re-tuned combat, which is a little more deliberate and a bit less mindless than past games. That's thanks in part to the addition of the handy dodge maneuver introduced in the console version of Diablo III. Though you'll still be annihilating dozens of bandits, giant spiders, living tree monsters, and other threats occupying both the open world and the game's numerous procedural dungeons, accomplishing this feels more difficult. While playing the betas, I noticed enemies swarm and attack in ways that force me to be more thoughtful about when to execute my abilities and how. This uptick in challenge plays into Blizzard's desire to avoid having the combat, as Piepiora puts it, "overwhelm the mood and atmosphere of the game."

Recruiting a friend or two may alleviate some difficulty if things get too rough. Diablo IV adopts the live service multiplayer framework of titles such as Destiny by having its players occupy various instances of its world. You can adventure as a tag team in two-player couch co-op (on console), in a group of four online, or partner up with a stranger you meet along the way.

Lone wolves can still enjoy the game as a solo experience, and they won't encounter scores of players crowding the world and breaking their immersion. I often only saw other people loitering in main towns, and even then, it was a small handful at most. Otherwise, I only occasionally encountered another human while exploring, which sometimes worked in my favor. I'd have my hands full fighting a powerful boss or struggling to complete a public event, such as battling waves

THE CLASSES

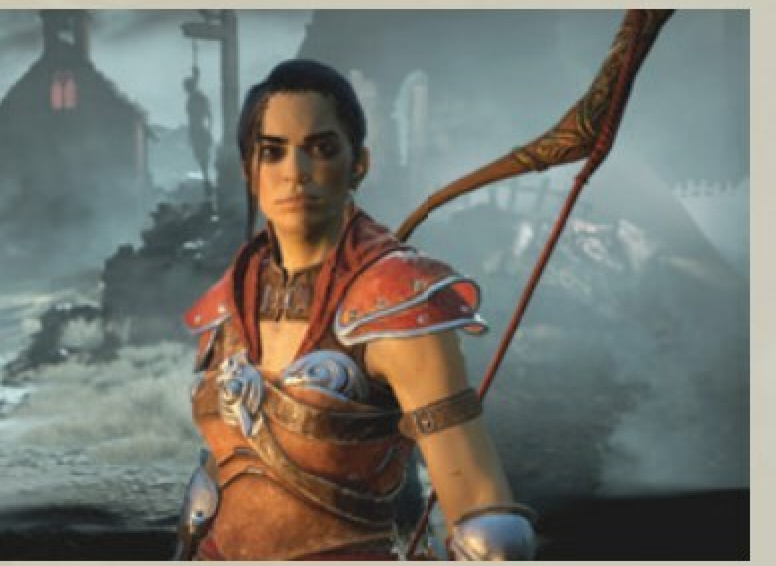


BARBARIAN

Like to hit things really hard? This class specializes in strength and melee combat thanks to its ability to expertly utilize multiple weapon types. By assigning skills to different weapons, players can deeply manipulate the effectiveness of their arsenal.

SORCERESS

Hurls various elemental spells from a distance, including devastating (and flashy) wide-reaching attacks. Set enemies ablaze, freeze them in place, stun them with lightning; this class can do all that and then some.

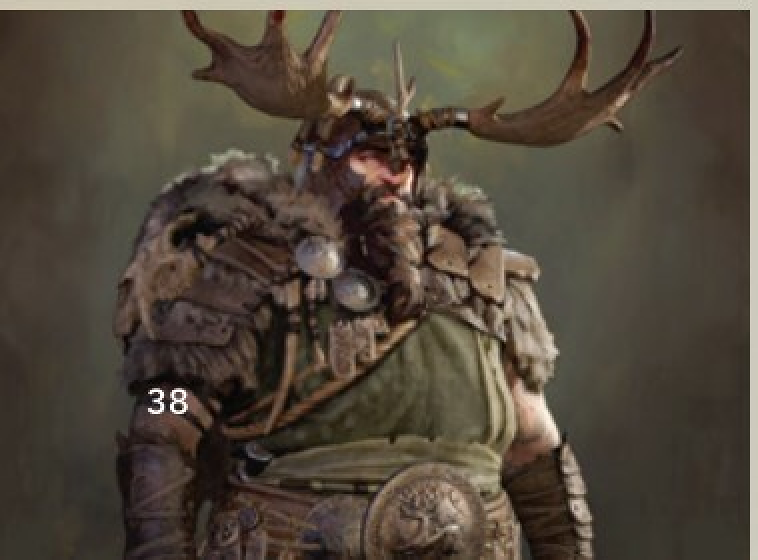


ROGUE

This Diablo 1 throwback can stab enemies using daggers or pick them off from afar with a bow. Rogue emphasizes dexterity and speed, letting you swiftly assault foes. You can even drag foes into a personal shadow realm to separate them from their allies and take them out.

NECROMANCER

If you enjoy summoning skeletons to do your dirty work, this is the class for you. In addition to commanding the dead to fight alongside you, necromancers utilize blood magic to eliminate threats.



DRUID

Combines brute strength with ranged magic, plus the ability the shapeshift into a powerful wolf and bear. Druids can also call upon animals to assist in combat.

of demons, only for a stranger to storm in to lend a much-needed helping hand.

Leveling has been expanded thanks to a massive new skill tree filled with powers, passive abilities, and other perks, each with dedicated sub-upgrades. In a nice twist, certain powerful armor pieces contain an embedded ability, allowing players to utilize a power they may not have unlocked in the skill tree. Overhauled itemization adds inherent attributes to equipment, such as one-handed weapons enabling faster attacking speed.

Blizzard previously confirmed that Diablo IV's story campaign takes at least 35 hours to complete. Tack on the plethora of side quests, optional dungeons, and other distractions, and players will likely lose dozens of extra hours roaming Sanctuary before the credits roll. But after investing so much time and effort into building your chosen character, what's left to do when the adventure wraps up? As far as Blizzard is concerned, that's when the real fun begins.

WHAT LIES BEYOND

Diablo III's implementation of live elements, such as seasonal content updates, incentivized players to engage with fresh content using new characters over its long shelf life. Blizzard baked that framework into Diablo IV from the beginning.

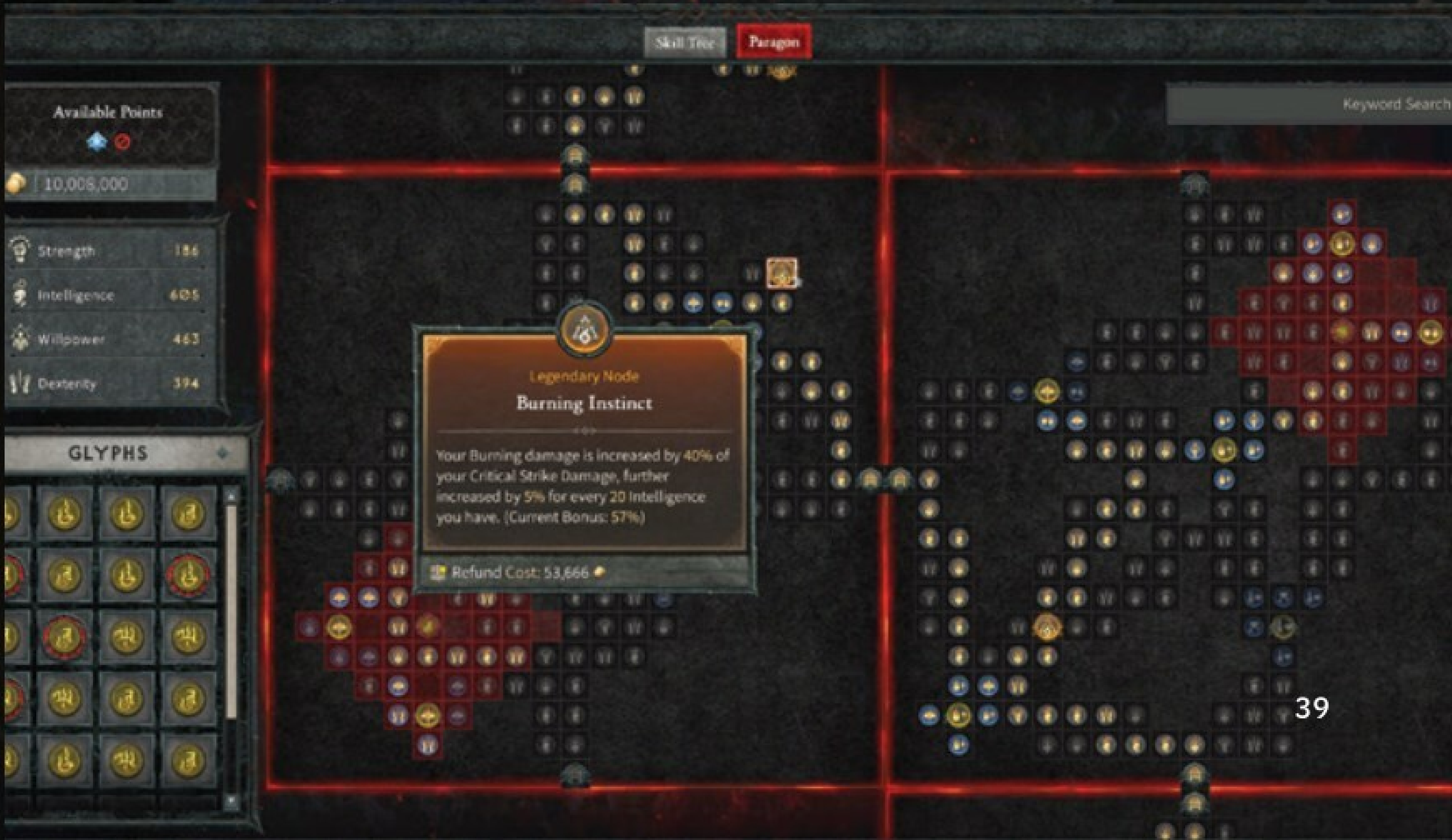
"When we saw players engaging with seasons in D3, we were able to see players enjoying this atmosphere where they can start fresh in this new season [and] kind of get exposed to new gameplay elements during the course of that season," says Piepiora. "They were fairly minor for the most part through many of the seasons; they were interesting, but they weren't massive updates like you see from some other live service games today.

"But players like to be able to start fresh, they like being able to make a new build, they like being able to explore a new character class and feel that they've got these goals to get the set for themselves as part of that season's worth of play," Piepiora continues. "And these are elements we want to be able to capitalize on more as we're thinking about Diablo 4; to create more of these fresh start experiences for players but give them more to look forward to as part of that as well."

Piepiora says post-launch quarterly content releases, set to hit every three months, will be "meaty updates." While he hesitates to use the word "expansion" for now, the team claims these updates will consist of new storylines tied to fresh mechanics and features. A seasonal battle pass accompanies these updates, which come in both free and premium paid tiers, the latter of which offers more valuable rewards for completing activities. Diablo IV also features an in-game store that only sells cosmetic items.

Diablo IV's always-online nature has rubbed some fans the wrong way due to the fear of an eventual server shutdown making the game unplayable. When asked about that concern, Blizzard says it plans to support the game for many years, pointing to its continued support of Diablo III as an example of its long-term commitment to legacy titles.

Until new content arrives, characters will continue evolving thanks to a revised take on the Paragon system from previous games, now called the Paragon Board. This new skill tree becomes available for each class upon reaching level 50. From there, they earn Paragon points distributed in multiples instead of single units. The board consists of interconnected nodes that bestow stat boosts relative to their rarity. For example, Normal tiles may provide minor improvements, while Rare or Legendary tiles are less plentiful but offer more significant benefits, such as unlocking Legendary powers.



10,008,000

Strength 186

Intelligence 605

Willpower 463

Dexterity 394

Legendary Node

Burning Instinct

Your Burning damage is increased by 40% of your Critical Strike Damage, further increased by 5% for every 20 Intelligence you have. (Current Bonus: 57%)

Refund Cost: 53,666

Players begin at the center of this board and make selections that, in turn, unlock nearby nodes within a radius. Lead game designer Zaven Haroutunian describes this as a form of dungeon crawl as players gradually unlock nodes in whichever direction a desired upgrade may lie. Socket nodes allow you to embed glyphs that can customize the Paragon board by bestowing additional benefits to nearby unlocked tiles. Upon reaching the edges of the Paragon Board, you encounter a gate title that lets you select and attach a new board with a fresh tile layout.

Over time, you attach more boards to construct a vast network of skills to fine-tune your character further. Tack on the ability to respec these skills, and the Paragon system gives late-game players a deeper layer of customizability and choice for min-maxing their characters.

Though you'll stop gaining Paragon points after reaching the level 100 cap, you can continue to earn more through Renown. This multi-tiered progression system rewards players for completing more general activities like running dungeons, finishing quests, or discovering new areas.

HELLTIDES AND NIGHTMARE DUNGEONS

Becoming powerful means little without equally formidable opponents to test your strength. World Tiers govern the overall difficulty level of Diablo IV's open world, with two being available at the start. Adventurer offers an easier journey for new and casual players, while the second, Veteran, essentially serves as the default setting for the experienced crowd. Beating the game unlocks Nightmare, the third, more challenging tier, and completing that playthrough unlocks Diablo IV's fourth and hardest tier, Torment.

Not only does each tier turn up the heat in terms of difficulty, but they also offer greater rewards. Higher World Tiers offer rarer, more powerful loot, bestowing powers that don't appear while playing at lower tiers. Not only that, but the harder World Tiers are home to the open-world event known as Helltide.

Helltides are "afflicted" zones of the map that appear periodically across Sanctuary that, while active, host deadlier enemy spawns within their borders. Expect to take on stronger versions of bosses you may have already toppled, except now they've been remixed with new attack patterns and other tricks. Killing monsters or completing other tasks within Helltide rewards special currency spent on opening special chests within the zone. These chests can reward specific types of loot, such as various armor parts, and if you lack the funds to open them, they'll remain visible on the map until you do.

A couple of Helltides can occur in different locations at once and remain present for a limited time, assuming players don't complete the tasks within them. They operate on a consistent schedule (roughly every hour or so for now) so that players can plan to tackle them ahead of time. Helltides are no cakewalk, but Blizzard says the difficulty of each one varies depending on your build and gear set, plus they're open for everyone to dive into and help each other out.

Fearless players who want to sprinkle even more spice on a dungeon crawl can look forward to Nightmare Dungeons. By locating different Nightmare Sigils (present only in the Nightmare World Tier and up), you can transform any dungeon into its Nightmare form, making it exponentially more difficult. Additionally, Sigils have affixes that can add devilish modifiers to give you a, perhaps literal, run for your money.

One example of these stipulations is a sentient pillar of lightning-infused stone that relentlessly pursues a single player as they're exploring the dungeon. If you're playing co-op, this entity occasionally shifts its attention to one of your buddies, and it can't be killed. Thus, you now have to survive an already difficult dungeon with this creature on your back, and Haroutunian cites this specific modifier as a personal favorite.

"It's almost like the reverse fantasy, right?" Haroutunian says. "Generally, players are this nigh unstoppable superpower thing murdering hordes of enemies. What if there was something worse than me trying to kill me? [...] So that's actually the root of the idea is the notion of something I can't just deal with by stunning it and running away."

Another Sigil's affix adds a shade that follows the player; once it catches them, it obscures their vision and summons monsters. Conquering Nightmare Dungeons results in collecting higher-rarity loot and other more powerful Sigils to modify other dungeons, making them attractive options for grinding alone or with friends while customizing that experience.

BECOMING A VESSEL OF HATRED

In addition to working together, players can tear each other apart by dueling in designated PvP zones dubbed Fields of Hatred. Slaying another person allows you to claim their purified shards, but you also take their ears as trophies, a nod to the previous games. However, being too good at killing others turns you into a Vessel of Hatred, a temporary status that essentially makes you a bounty target visible to everyone else. Other people are incentivized to take you out because doing so earns them a ton of Red Dust, a currency used for cosmetics. But if the wanted player can survive any attempts on their life until the timer expires, they'll also reap the benefits.

Blizzard won't specify how many players need to die to achieve a wanted status, only hinting that you'll need to drop a lot of bodies to trigger it. The studio does say it has safeguards to prevent friend groups from farming this system by having them slaughter each other, become wanted, kill that person, get rewarded, rinse and repeat.

THE AFTERMATH OF DARKNESS

Diablo IV's campaign is a globetrotting romp taking players through each of Sanctuary's regions. Even after you think you've seen most of what the world has to offer, the game will keep you busy, largely thanks to the Whispers of the Dead. Blizzard is cagey about describing this system without giving away narrative spoilers, only vaguely explaining that players encounter a "polite" talking tree at some point during the campaign. Eventually, this tree will request the completion of special missions, which reward Grim Favors for doing so.

These randomly generated quests populate Sanctuary, ranging from completing world events, running a dungeon, or killing world bosses. Missions cycle and change over time, and completing them causes new quests to appear. Turning in enough Grim Favors to the tree allows players to choose from a selection of reward caches, such as weapons or armor, and these offerings change with each visit.

Blizzard hopes the Whispers of the Dead encourages players to revisit previous areas, which will have changed due to the campaign's events. The studio didn't specify the extent of these differences, only revealing that previously locked areas of the map become accessible, new dungeons appear, and enemy spawns get shaken up in some fashion.

It's a peek into how much content Sanctuary packs beyond what's visible on the map during the main adventure. Blizzard team members hope this content entices players to venture beyond the main narrative to discover it. "It's really easy to get wrapped up in that and not give the environments a second chance or go and explore and find those random loops that you can find," says game producer Ash Sweetring Vickey. "I highly encourage players to do that. There is so much s--t out in the world that you can go discover, and I want to encourage all players to take that opportunity to do so."

PORTABLE POSSIBILITIES

Dungeon crawlers make for a great portable gaming experience, and Diablo III was no different when it launched on Switch in 2018. Can we expect a similar downsizing for Diablo IV? Unfortunately, Blizzard has nothing to share right now regarding a future Switch port. However, that could change in the future. "I think it's safe to say that we want to make sure that as many players as possible can play Diablo moving forward," says associate game director Joseph Piepiora. "That'll always be our position."

As for Steam Deck, Diablo IV isn't available on Steam, but the game is technically playable if you install and run it through Battle.net on the device. Some players were able to play the recent betas on the

APPROACHING THE FINISH LINE

"Passionate" would be the aptest word to describe Blizzard's general attitude towards its work on Diablo IV. Speaking to the designers, it's evident that the world, story, and action they've crafted have all been in service of delivering a massive love letter to the franchise and its fans. All that's left now is to see if players reciprocate that affection.

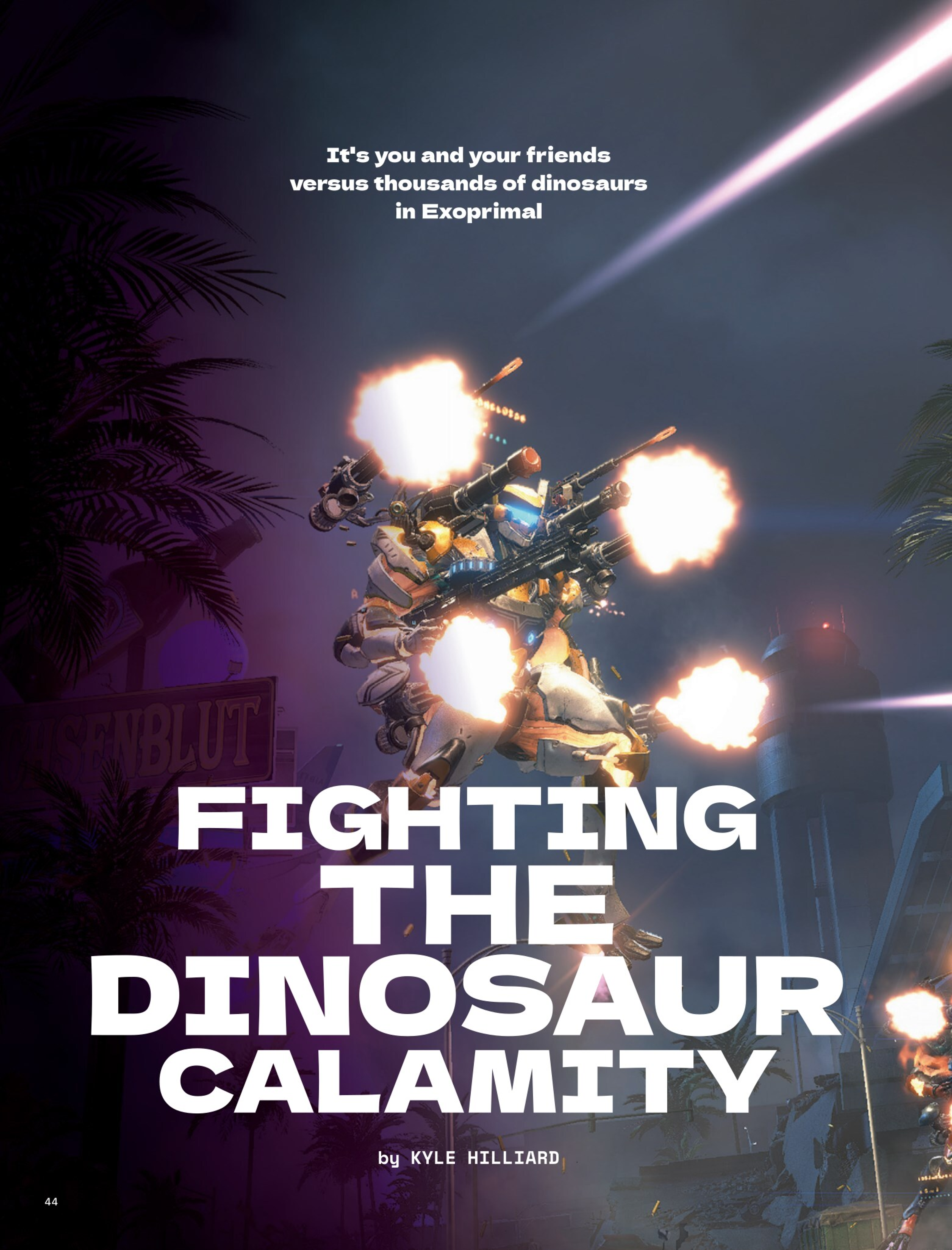
"It's not on us to ascribe greatness to it," says Piepiora. "Our work is our work. We believe in it, and we think we've done the very best that we can with it. We're very excited about it. We think it's fantastic. But ultimately, it kind of comes down to what everyone playing it feels as they go through the experience."

"It's all enthusiasm, right?" says Vickey. "And it motivates us to continue creating content to continue supporting the live service side of this. It's all really great. We love Diablo and Lilith – mostly Lilith."

After spending years working on the game in secrecy, then letting players in through multiple beta tests, the team couldn't be more excited to cross the finish line. But reaching the summit of that mountain only reveals another, larger climb ahead as Blizzard shifts to absorbing and incorporating feedback to shape upcoming years' worth of content rollouts.

Judging from my enjoyment of the betas, Diablo IV is in a very strong place heading into its launch. I enjoyed smashing skeletons into dust as the Barbarian as much as I gleefully roasted bandits with fireballs as the Sorceress. The classes I've had the chance to use are entertaining in their own unique ways, and I liked the increased agency I have in charting their progression paths. The more cinematic approach to storytelling, plus the inclusion of more cutscenes, presents this grisly epic in a more engaging manner not often seen in an overhead dungeon crawler. I'm already afraid of how much time will mysteriously vanish as I'm sidetracked by the seemingly bottomless well of dungeons and challenges sprinkled across this cursed landscape.

With so much promise, we only hope that Blizzard's efforts – the mindshare of Diablo's biggest fans – ensure this nightmarish adventure feels heaven-sent when it launches on June 6. ■



It's you and your friends versus thousands of dinosaurs in Exoprimal

FIGHTING THE DINOSAUR CALAMITY

by KYLE HILLIARD

Hundreds, maybe even thousands of Velociraptors pour from the sky, falling from portals that look like floating pools of water. And if that wasn't enough, occasionally, a Triceratops, Ankylosaurus, or another dinosaur with a deep well of HP enters the fray and steals your attention from the dozens of raptors you were already struggling with. The whole affair is, frankly, absurd, which is by design, according to Exoprimal's director, Takuro Hiraoka.

"Obviously, as a game, we want to release good product and keep it serious," Hiraoka says. "But the reality is, there are a lot of – pardon my saying – bats*** crazy things that happen in this game, right? You get dinosaurs falling out of the sky. It's not something you're ever going to really see anywhere." Hiraoka relates the tone of Exoprimal to a comic book. Underneath all the craziness of a comic, alongside superpowers and world-ending calamities, there is a serious story – or at least an attempt at one. But there are also the fun, absurd elements all happening alongside it. "We want to keep that serious story mode there, but we also want to have those silly components really be prevalent so that people can really get that good balance of seriousness and silliness when they're playing together," Hiraoka adds.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 2 to 10-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** July 14

FIGHTING THE DINO FIGHT

Mechanically, Exoprimal is a multiplayer game where teams comprised of various classes work together to fight swarms of dinosaurs. Two groups of five race to see who can combat the dinosaur threat the fastest over the course of the two phases. Then, during a third and final phase, it's team, versus dinosaur, versus the other team. During that third phase, players sometimes have to protect a payload as it makes its way toward a destination or pick up collectibles, and Capcom says more versions of that final phase will be in Exoprimal when it launches this summer. Capcom also says a 10-player cooperative mode will be available where players take on powerful enemies together.

Exoprimal recently had a two-part beta, offering a few days of closed gameplay before opening up to a larger audience for a more open period. During our time in the beta, we only got a taste of the absurd dinosaurs pouring out of portals. A cutscene did play before the tutorial with a fake newscast detailing the danger of the dinosaur hordes and teasing the presence of an A.I., Leviathan from the fictional Aibius corporation, put in place to help humanity survive, but it was all intentionally unclear.

MAYBE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS BAD

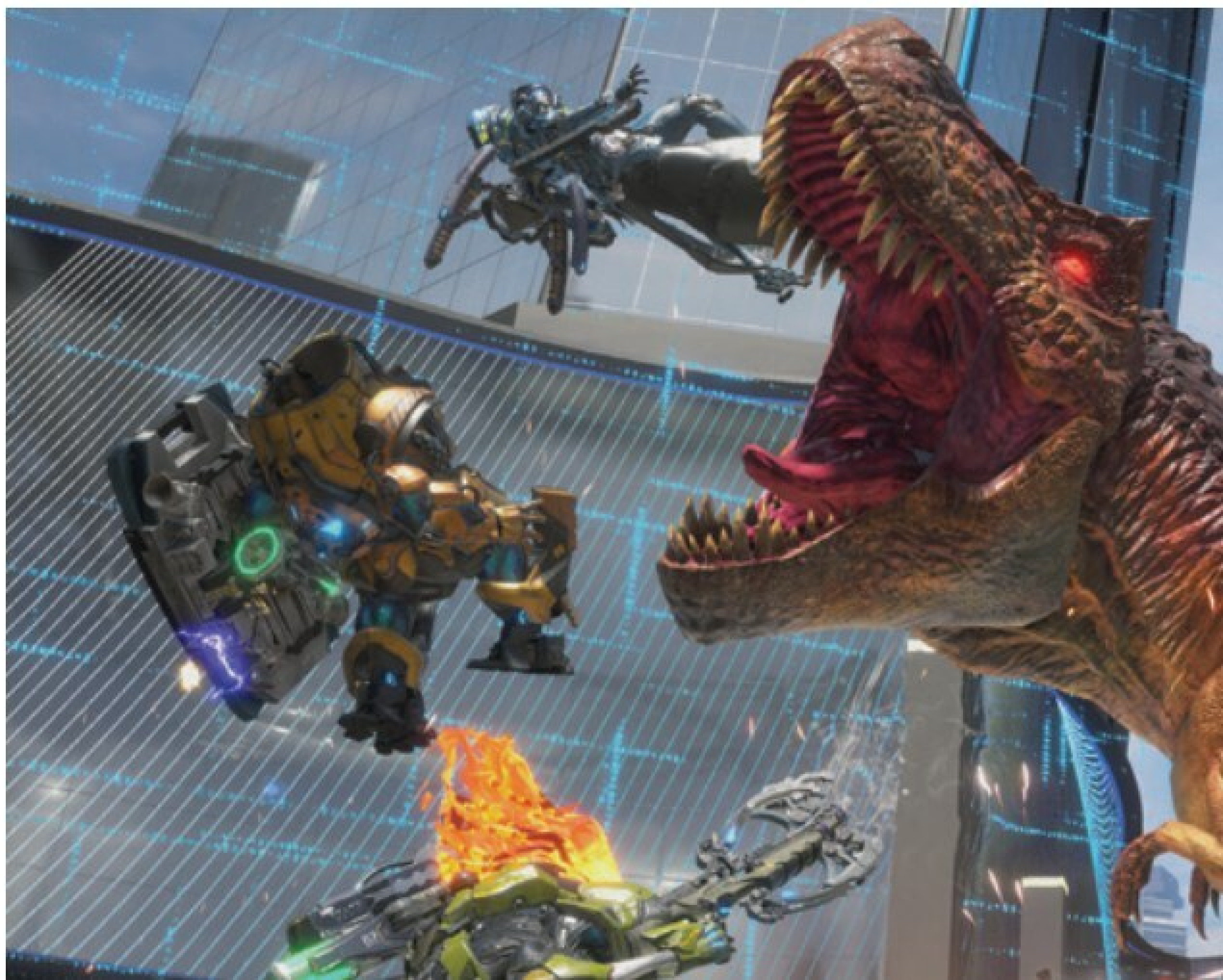
In the context of the world, everyone agrees that herds of Velociraptors running rampant through city streets is a bad and dangerous thing, but in the context of gameplay, it seems Leviathan is summoning the dinosaurs you and your Exosuited compatriots fight against.

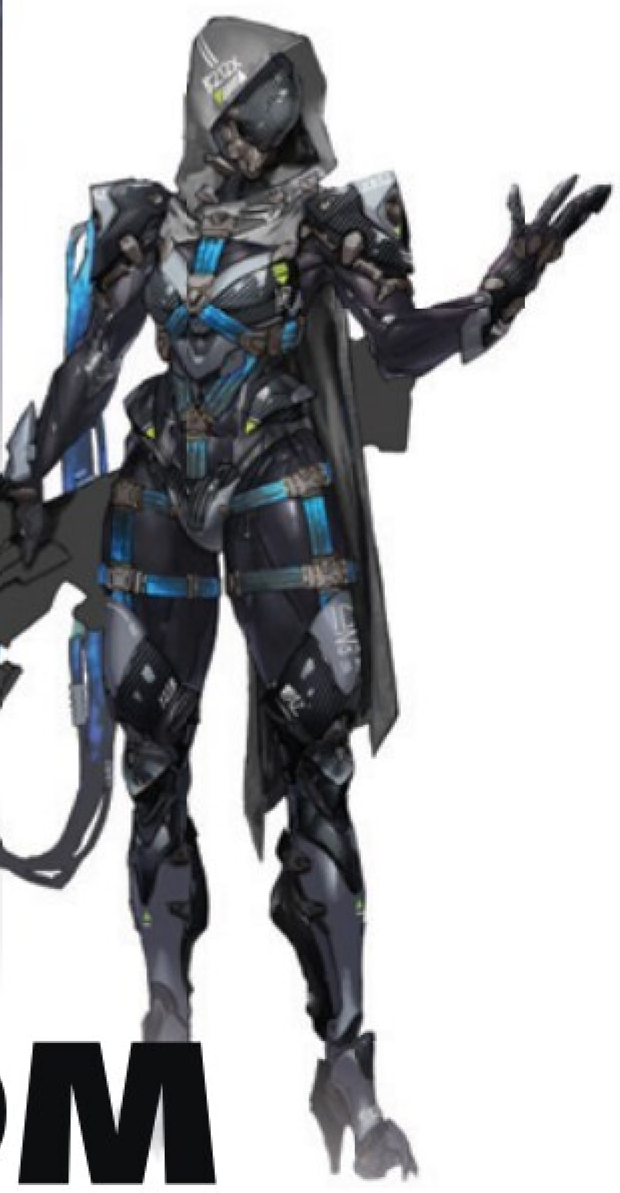
Four other players and I encountered a gigantic skyscraper in one repeated instance. Leviathan seemed to open a portal on top of it to drop dinosaurs to the ground. As the dinosaurs ran down the side of the building and others awkwardly fell and bounced against the hard concrete, Leviathan was enamored with the display. "A Raptor swarm is cresting over the Aibius corporation building. The tower provides a striking backdrop for the raptor cascade. I advise you to prepare your strategy as the raptors fall to the earth below," Leviathan tells the player with an undertone of admiration. Even beyond the bizarre premise of dinosaurs dropping from the sky, the context for everything is strange.

"We're not entirely sure how deep into the story we should go because I don't want to spoil too much,

MUST BE PLAYED WITH OTHERS

Exoprimal has a story with cutscenes and characters beyond the one you create initially, but it is strictly a multiplayer game. "There isn't going to be a story for single players to progress through by themselves," Exoprimal's director, Takuro Hiraoka confirms. "Of course, you can play solo through things like the training mode and the tutorial and whatnot. But for the majority of the game, it's going to be you playing with other people to progress to the story and go against these dinos." Exoprimal focuses on the multiplayer experience and organizing your team composition to create the best mix of players to tackle the dinosaur swarms. Of course, you can connect with random players online in matchmaking to progress and fight back.





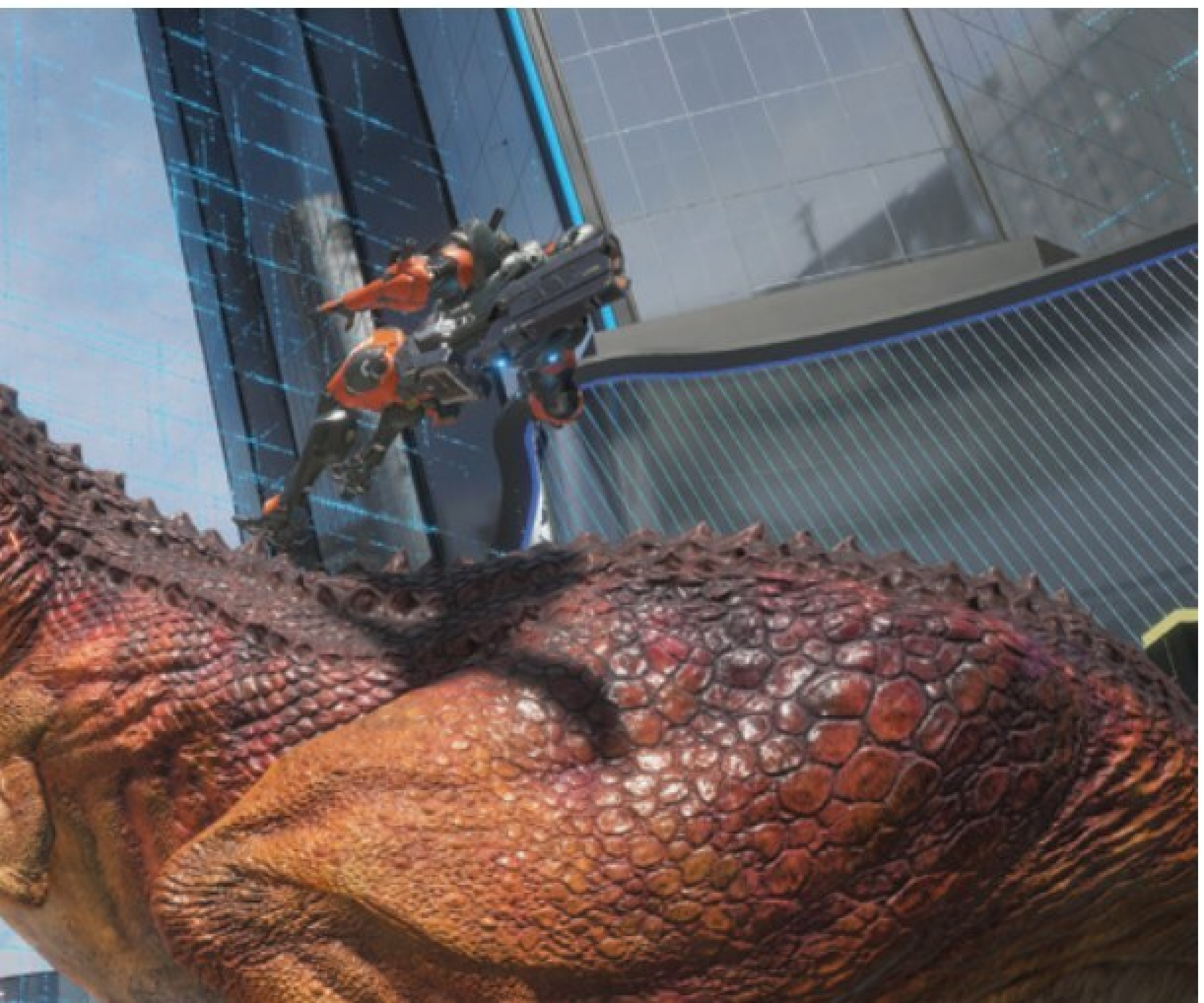
CAPCOM UNLOCKS

A big incentive to fight dinosaurs with friends in Exoprimal is the promise of cosmetics. New Exosuit and weapon designs will be rewarded for continued play, including items referencing other Capcom properties. "Yes, there are Capcom collaboration contents that are being planned. There are a variety of intellectual properties that seem to fit quite well with Exoprimal in various ways," producer Ichiro Kiyokawa says, offering the familiar refrain that there is nothing to announce at this time.

so to speak, but the game itself is set [between] the years 2040 to 2043," Hiraoka says. During that time, dinosaur outbreaks plague the world, and an organization, Aibius Corporation, is assembled to fight back. It does so by recruiting Exofighters, sent to fight dinosaurs as they appear. Hiraoka was intentionally vague, but he did refer to Leviathan as a "notorious character" and teased its potential relationship to everything happening in the world.

The strangest thing about playing in the beta is that Leviathan, the A.I. seemingly put in place to fight back against the ancient reptiles, seems to be orchestrating the portals. "Yes, you are correct in understanding Leviathan is, in fact summoning these dinosaurs," Hiraoka confirms. The humans versus dinosaurs battle seems to be an endless war game that has been ongoing for some time with no sign of closure. Hiraoka claims that what seems like a straightforward attempt by Aibius Corporation to recruit more Exofighters is more complex than it seems. "As players will play through the game, various cutscenes will start to play, and they'll start to really get an understanding of what is Leviathan's connection. What is going on here?" Hiraoka says. "While it may seem like a very straightforward story, there's really a lot more to it that folks haven't seen yet."

To make matters even more confusing – or interesting, depending on your feelings – when your team loses against the dinosaurs, a cutscene plays where your character gets ripped apart. Their head even gets torn off before getting seemingly transported away. You are playing as the same character in every match, though, which begs the question: how does one survive to fight another day after getting eaten by dinosaurs? Hiraoka says Leviathan is collecting as much data as it can from Exofighters to create the optimal army, and it uses a technologically advanced ability. "The reality is that Leviathan has a way of manipulating time, so the person is getting pulled out of that scene before he or she is actually eaten," Hiraoka says. "And it also serves as an impetus for people who are watching these videos later to go, 'Oh, yeah, that was a terrible situation. I don't ever want that to happen to me. I'm going to fight this way to avoid that sort of situation.' It's really Leviathan playing with that concept of time and space to see what can be done to optimize his excellency to push the next fighters even further."



WHY DINOSAURS?

Exoprimal is a sci-fi game taking place in the future, but dinosaurs as enemies was an early and easy decision for the team. “The first question was, ‘What are the strongest creatures that have existed in the world, right? And everybody came to the consensus that dinosaurs were them,” Hiraoka says. Capcom’s Monster Hunter series already exists as a multiplayer game for teams to work together against one gigantic threat, but for Exoprimal, Capcom wanted teams to work together to fight hordes. “We wanted to try to bring something new to the gaming industry, you know?” Hiraoka says. “The idea of instead of a large monster, a large number of enemies, right? Something new and exciting that we haven’t seen before.”

In terms of their design, Takuro acknowledges that they are exaggerated. Exoprimal’s Tyrannosaurus is much bigger and more muscular than scientists have represented it. The team also decided not to fully embrace the modern, scientific interpretations to make the dinosaurs more recognizable. When asked about whether feathers were ever considered, Takuro says, “We are very familiar with the various scientific discussions that have happened around dinosaurs,” but the developers all decided that familiarity was more important. Plus, the traditional interpretation of dinosaurs as lizards is more threatening.

SOMETHING NEW

Our time with the two betas was positive. Capcom has earned confidence over the last five or so years with a string of excellent games within its familiar properties. But Exoprimal is something entirely new, even if it recalled Dino Crisis (see sidebar) at first glance, making me unsure of what to expect. Our matches were chaotic and surprising. Whether it can retain that fun through repeated play sessions remains to be seen, and the teases from the team about the story are enticing. I look forward to seeing the full suite of modes the final game will offer, new dinosaur enemies, and discovering the whole deal with Leviathan. Hiraoka concluded our discussion by saying, “Exoprimal does look a little bit intimidating. It does look a little bit tough. But the reality is if you pick it up and play, you’ll realize it can be enjoyed by a very casual crowd.” ■

A DINO CRISIS

Exoprimal is not the first Capcom game to feature dinosaurs. It’s not even the first Capcom game to feature dinosaurs coming out of portals. Between 1999 and 2003, Capcom released three numbered Dino Crisis games and two spin-offs. All the games are slightly different, but it’s remembered as a Resident Evil-esque series where a scientific experiment gone awry brings dinosaurs from the past through a portal to the present. Shinji Mikami primarily handled both Resident Evil and Dino Crisis, so their similarities are understandable. When Exoprimal was first revealed, many enthusiasts (myself included) thought it was a new Dino Crisis game and were surprised when the name Exoprimal appeared.

According to Takuro, Exoprimal was always meant to be an original game without ties to previous intellectual property, including ones under the Capcom umbrella. “From the very beginning, the idea was, ‘Let’s create a new IP. Let’s challenge ourselves and do something new and exciting!’” Exoprimal’s director, Takuro Hiraoka says. Dinosaurs came about because they seemed like the best and most familiar enemy type for players to battle.

When asked if the fact that both games feature dinosaurs and portals was a coincidence, Takuro flashed a big smile and an enthusiastic thumbs-up so that our translator wouldn’t have to verbalize his answer.

THE RE ENGINE

Exoprimal is built using Capcom's proprietary RE Engine, which is surprising considering the other Capcom games that have used the engine are quite different. The first game to publicly use it was Resident Evil 7: Biohazard, which caused many to dub the engine the Resident Evil engine, which is not what the 'RE' stands for. Instead, the acronym is confusingly shorthand for Reach for the Moon. In Japan, the Resident Evil series is called Biohazard, which is why Exoprimal technical director Kazuki Abe is surprised that anyone ever thought the engine was named after the survival horror series. "It's really just a matter of coincidence that Resident Evil games are also developed using this engine."

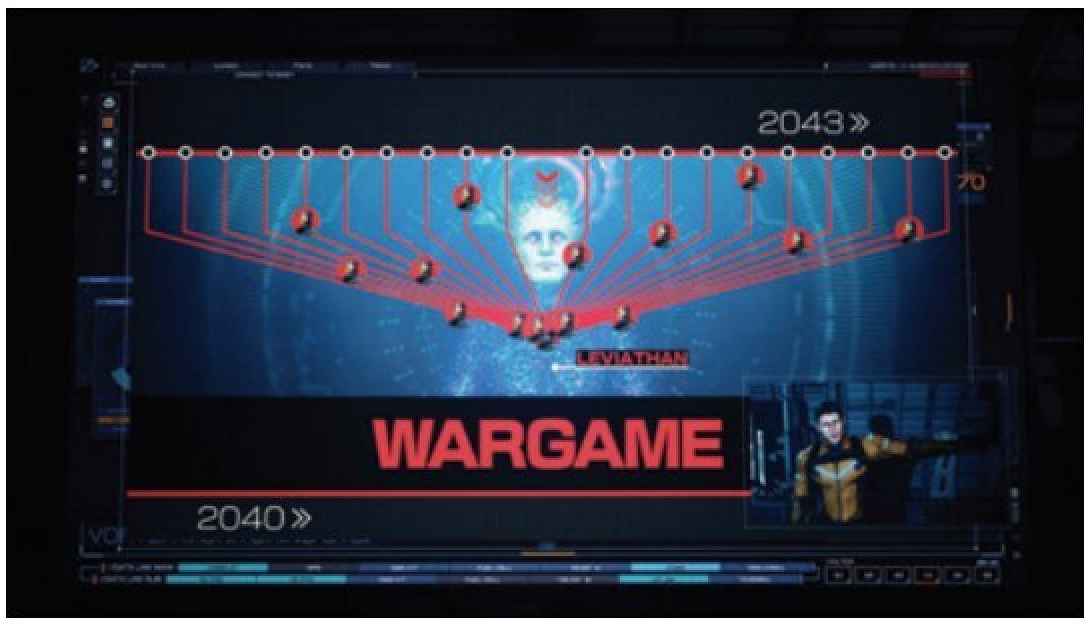
Since Resident Evil 7, RE Engine has been used to develop Resident Evil Village, the Resident Evil 2, 3, and 4 remakes, Devil May Cry 5, Ghosts' n Goblins Resurrection, Monster Hunter Rise, Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium, and the multiplayer Resident Evil Re:Verse. It is also the engine being used to develop Street Fighter 6, Pragmata, and Dragon's Dogma II.

Its versatility and flexibility are impressive, thanks to the RE Engine team being in-house at Capcom. It means that if a Capcom game needs the engine to do something specific for the game being made, the team can go directly to the source and have it added. Rather than putting a game in an engine, the RE Engine can pivot and mold around the game based on needs. "If certain components for the game don't exist in our engine already, the RE Engine team can work to implement those features to allow those things to become possible," Abe says.

The Exoprimal team was less confident about where the RE Engine logo came from, which features a creepy, slightly misshapen hand reaching for the sky, silhouetted in front of the moon. "The idea of the orientation logo with the hand reaching up is the idea that as an engine, the game that you envision, creating the dream that you have for game development, is just within reach," Abe says. "And by reaching out with this engine, you can grab it, reach it, and make it happen. This is entirely hearsay. Not entirely sure if this is true, but that is the idea behind the visual for the art engine logo."

Bikitoa Incident

Majesty: But according to these logs, the collapse was preceded by a mass dinosaur outbreak.

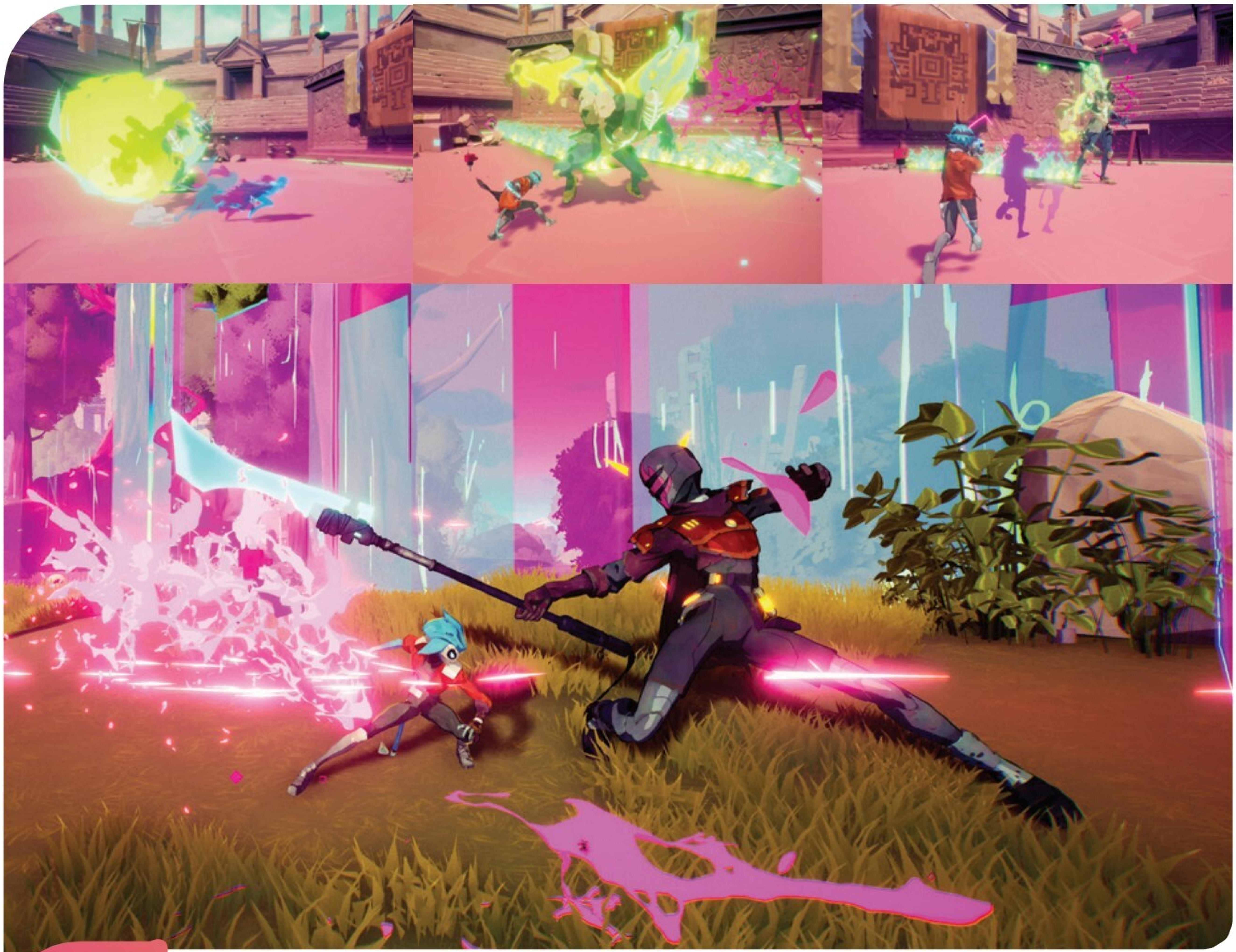


Scream with Selfi !

MOLDING × BREAKERS

An inside look at HYPER LIGHT BREAKER

BY CHARLES HARTE



Early in my interview with Alx Preston, founder and creative director at Heart Machine, he corrects me on an important detail about Hyper Light Breaker. I'd spent the first few minutes referring to it as a sequel, but he clarifies, "It's not Hyper Light Drifter 2. It's a follow-up, meaning that it's an installment in the franchise of Hyper Light. So it's a different game, different protagonists, different gameplay." After getting the chance to learn more about the game and see it in action, this distinction makes a lot of sense. For me to call it a sequel was misleading, given how different the games look and play.

Breaker is a 3D rogue-lite with a strong emphasis on multiplayer. Players explore an area called the Overgrowth, collect weapons and gear, and fight off monsters. And though the first Hyper Light game had a fixed protagonist with a focused narrative, Breaker allows players to create and customize their own warrior, known in this world as Breakers. It's a completely new direction – one the team is clearly excited about.

"I am the type of person creatively that likes to do new things," Preston says. "I think I would just get creatively exhausted if I was just making sequel after sequel, the same thing over and over with little differences." He expresses admiration for Image & Form, the developer behind the SteamWorld games, a series where each new entry is wildly different yet undeniably part of the same franchise. "I think for us it's no different," he says. "In that, we just think about what it means to exist in the world of Hyper Light."

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Gearbox Publishing
DEVELOPER Heart Machine **RELEASE** Fall (Early Access)

AN AMBITIOUS ARENA

Much of Hyper Light Breaker will seem immediately familiar, but Heart Machine has made great strides to make this experience feel fresh. After learning how to build 3D environments for Solar Ash, the team decided to take things a step further and create the Overgrowth: an open world that's different every run.

The design process was long and challenging, Preston says. "It's basically designing with math at the end of the day." Even though the world is procedurally generated, Heart Machine didn't want it to feel that way. "We're still making sure that there are good sight lines, that the 3D world feels good to explore and Traverse. You still have hidden things, you still have objects and items and enemies distributed, and it feels like it is more handcrafted. And that was the intention. Can you get good level design in a procedural world? You can, you know, just it takes some effort."

Initially, the Overgrowth was a series of separated biomes organized in a stage-by-stage format, but midway through the development process, the team realized it could merge the stages into one. Referred to as the "Pangea Shift," the new approach simultaneously opened up new opportunities in the level design process while also condensing some of the work that would have been required to make separate stages. Biomes still exist, but now they're interconnected in ways that weren't previously possible.

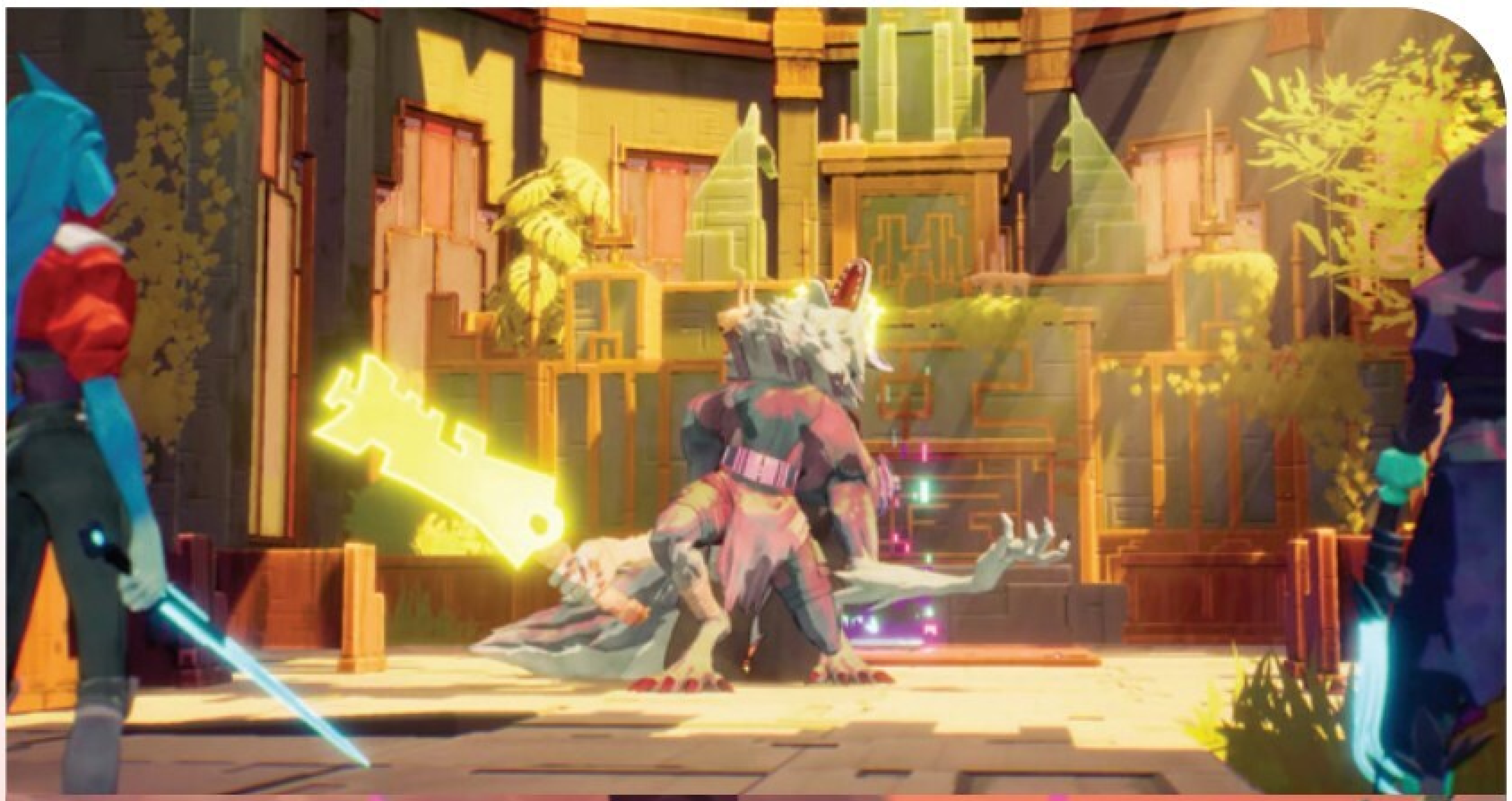
"We've done something that I think is pretty special," Preston says. "It's one of its many unique elements. And it's probably its most unique element."

BUILD A BREAKER

To explore this varied world, you'll need to create and customize your Breaker. Preston clarifies that the character creation process isn't "in-depth", but you'll be able to pick a species and style the character how you like. Players will also be able to customize a loadout that fits their specific tastes; the gun and sword from Drifter return, but they're one part of a much wider array of weapons to pick and choose from. "It's still high energy, still fast-paced," Preston says. "But at the same time, we have a lot more detail and depth to our combat systems than we've ever had before."

You'll have to pick your weapons carefully since you'll be battling your way through the Overgrowth. Your character's main goal is to defeat big bosses known as Crowns, with the ultimate goal of defeating the Drift King, the main source of evil in this world. But to reach any of these powerful foes, you'll have to find and activate beacons guarded by mini-bosses. While presumably not as dangerous as Crowns, Preston says the mini-bosses are "still mean, mean bosses, but they'll be more randomized throughout runs."

Heart Machine gave us a look at one of these bosses in particular: The Last Master. As a dead, resurrected Breaker, they have a similar appearance to player characters but are notably taller, looming over any Breaker foolish enough to approach them.



"[The Last Master is] a reflection of the player character in a lot of ways," Preston says. "And so, they'll be using a lot of the same weapons and loadouts as you, but more specific and tailored to their theme." Mini bosses also dash and jump just like player characters and can even climb walls to pursue if you try to get away. They're designed to be as scary as they are deadly.

"It's really interesting to kind of teach players through death," Preston says, ruminating on roguelikes for a moment. "With single-player affairs or other games that don't have this type of structure, you're typically trying to safeguard players from death a lot of the time, or at least provide them outs. But with roguelikes, you're kind of intentionally trying to kill the player in a lot of ways because you have that advantage of like, 'Hey, runs are runs, and you're gonna go back and inevitably have more runs.'"

That said, don't expect Dark Souls-level difficulty from this game. "I don't think we're ever going to make an easy game, but I definitely wouldn't say that our games are going to be, like, super hardcore," Preston clarifies. "We want to have accessibility just as much as we want to have challenge."

CREATING A COMMUNITY

Preston and the team aren't just excited to make a rogue-lite because of the combat. After years of working on Solar Ash mostly in secret, Heart Machine wants to spend more time developing "out in the open." With a rogue-lite structure, it's able to put the game into early access, connect more with the community, and polish its product accordingly. Preston also says that because of this genre, the game is "more accessible in a lot of ways and has a ton of replay value." It's not a game you'll play through once and put down; ideally, players can get together with a group of friends to play regularly.

Throughout our conversation, I notice a particular focus on the idea of community and togetherness. I ask Preston if it's a response to the isolation the world dealt with at the start of the pandemic, but he shakes his head and says, "Not at all. This is stuff I've been thinking about forever." He says it harkens back to Glitch City, a collective of indie developers he was a founding member of back in 2013. At Glitch City, developers don't necessarily work on the same projects, but it provides a space for them to coexist while working on individual projects. It's within this atmosphere that Hyper Light Drifter was created.

Now, Preston says community is an important concept for Heart Machine as a whole going forward, and the multiplayer elements of Hyper Light Breaker are a clear example of that. The game is playable with co-op enabled from start to finish, with multiplayer elements built into the game's foundation. When I ask about the game's inspirations, I expected Preston to list off a bunch of indie roguelikes, but he also brings up more social games like Destiny 2 and Phantasy Star Online.

"I think there's a lot of sentiment lately that video games are like modern golf or other ways to just hang out," he says. "The hope is that there'll be some element here that feels like you're hanging out with friends."

Hyper Light Breaker enters Early Access this fall. When I ask Preston what a successful launch looks like, he has a few answers. He wants to keep the lights on, to make enough to allow Heart Machine to keep making games: both standard responses. But in the end, he gives one more marker for success, one that also seems to describe the core ethos of the game.

"I think [the game will be successful] if it resonates and makes an audience for itself that isn't just core Drifter fans. It brings in new people, and it starts to connect friends and strangers online to just have fun together," Preston concludes. "You know, if players have fun online together, that's a pretty good marker of success for this game." ■

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STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Force pushing forward

When Respawn Entertainment announced it was making a third-person action game in the Star Wars universe, many fans didn't know how to react; the studio was critically acclaimed but, at the time, known for shooters like Titanfall. However, 2019's Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order surpassed the expectations of many, delivering a terrific adventure. Now, with all the learnings of Fallen Order, Respawn hopes to top itself and create another unforgettable adventure.

My gameplay session starts aboard *The Mantis*, protagonist Cal Kestis' ship from the first game. However, the trip doesn't last long; he doesn't exactly stick the landing on his approach to the planet of Koboh, where he's going to visit an outpost where his old pal Greez lives. The crash-landing damages the gyro module of *The Mantis*, but hopefully, Greez has a spare one.

As I bring up the map system, I sigh in relief; the previously convoluted minimap is more streamlined and less confusing. I mentally note the direction I need to head and begin descending toward my destination.

Soon after, I encounter my first enemies: the Battle Droids common within the Prequel Trilogy. They rattle off a "Roger, Roger" and fire in my direction. The Empire has been in control of the galaxy for a decade at this point, so seeing Battle Droids is an odd sight. However, the next enemy I find answers some of those questions.

As I enter a nearby cave, a more formidable foe greets me alongside two more Battle Droids; it seems this planet's raider faction has repurposed the droids to fight alongside them. This Bedlam Raider has agile and powerful melee attacks, and though I'm rusty with a lightsaber at first, I quickly recall how to take down enemies. I parry his attacks using the traditional single lightsaber and slash him down. Combat feels as good as ever, even if I've barely touched Cal's skill tree.

One of the big improvements to combat is the addition of new, fully featured lightsaber stances. The balanced single-saber stance and the crowd-control-focused double-blade stance from the first game return, but I was most excited to get my hands on the new twin-saber stance, where Cal wields a lightsaber in each hand. The twin stance appeared in Fallen Order but wasn't fully fleshed out. In Survivor, it is, and it focuses on aggression and offense. After my demo, I also glimpse a stance where Cal wields both a lightsaber and a blaster.

I was impressed by the exploration throughout my demo. The overwhelming number of one-way slides appear to be gone, making a much more natural landscape and less frustrating flow to stages. In fact, the one time I encountered a one-way slope, I could wall-run up it – a seeming acknowledgment from Respawn of one of players' big complaints with Fallen Order's level design.

Soon enough, I arrive at Rambler's Reach, the outpost I sought upon crash-landing. I approach the cantina, Pyloon's Saloon, and a frog-like creature named Turgle flies out of the door; it seems he sold counterfeit goods to the wrong crowd. He pleads for his life, but a high-ranking Bedlam Raider named Zeik begins electrocuting him on the order of Rayvis, a hulking Gen'Dai that commands at least a portion of the raiders on Koboh. Being the noble Jedi Knight he is, Cal steps in right before Zeik goes in for the kill, resulting in a boss fight.

I won't spoil much more beyond this point. But I uncover several other compelling mysteries I can't wait to explore, many of which surround an anomaly called Tanalorr, which Cal and his friends decide to pursue. Along the way, I battle several other creatures, including large Bilemaws, grotesque Shiverpedes, and powerful Wampa-like Mogus. Each creature demands distinct strategies, and I'm not ashamed to admit I was bested on multiple occasions.

After spending three hours playing Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, I'm hopeful Respawn has learned all the correct lessons from its first attempt at creating a Star Wars adventure. The navigation feels more natural, the combat is more fleshed out, and the story goes in intriguing directions. If the slice of gameplay I experienced is any indication, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor might be a worthy successor to the already great Fallen Order. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

See Star Wars: Jedi Survivor in action with our New Gameplay Today video on GameInformer.com

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Respawn Entertainment **RELEASE** April 28

DEAD ISLAND 2

A promising apocalypse

After nearly a decade, the wait is almost over: Dead Island 2 is out very soon. While we already did a deep dive into its first few hours back in Issue 352, we were given another opportunity to go hands-on with new characters and a different section of the game. We also spoke with the game's design director, Adam Duckett, who oversees Dead Island 2's gameplay and level design. Overall, the game continues to show promise, and I can't wait to experience all Hell-A has to offer when it launches this April.

If you missed our cover story (or need a refresher on the series), the original Dead Island was released in 2011 and told the story of four survivors trying to escape from the fictional, zombie-infested island of Banoi. Over a decade later, the franchise made its way to Dambuster Studios, which created six new playable characters with a story set in Los Angeles. While our previous coverage was seen through the lens of Dani and Ryan, this time, we looked at the other four characters.

At the start of our preview, we see a quick introductory cutscene showing off each playable character to give the player an idea of their personalities before committing to one for the rest of the game. They each take a unique approach boarding the last evac plane out of LA: hustler Bruno takes a picture of someone else's QR code to swindle his way past security, and motorcyclist Carla speeds her bike right onto the tarmac. Stuntman Jacob clings to the evacuation plane's landing gear as it takes off into the sky. But out of all of them, the character that called out to me the most was Amy, a paralympic runner with a prosthetic foot.

"With Amy, she was first and foremost an athlete," Duckett says. "So, her agility is high, her speed is high." While some characters start with the ability to block, Amy starts with the dodge ability and unlocks a flying kick early on. Duckett says her playstyle is about being agile and nimble, and it's immediately apparent while playing as her. One of Amy's character-specific abilities allows her to regain stamina by throwing weapons, so one of my go-to combos is a weapon throw into a dash strike, a move with a high stamina cost that the weapon throw allows me to effectively ignore. This is just the tip of the iceberg: I could tell the opportunities for cool combos like this would only increase as I played more.

This demo also allowed us to move further into the game, playing a mission where the protagonist attempts to hunt down a friend that's wandered onto the lot of a film studio. As I make my way through, I fight zombies on a sitcom set and a film about a giant spider. The levels have interactive elements, too: trigger the pyrotechnics to set zombies ablaze or turn on the sprinklers to make them vulnerable to electric damage.

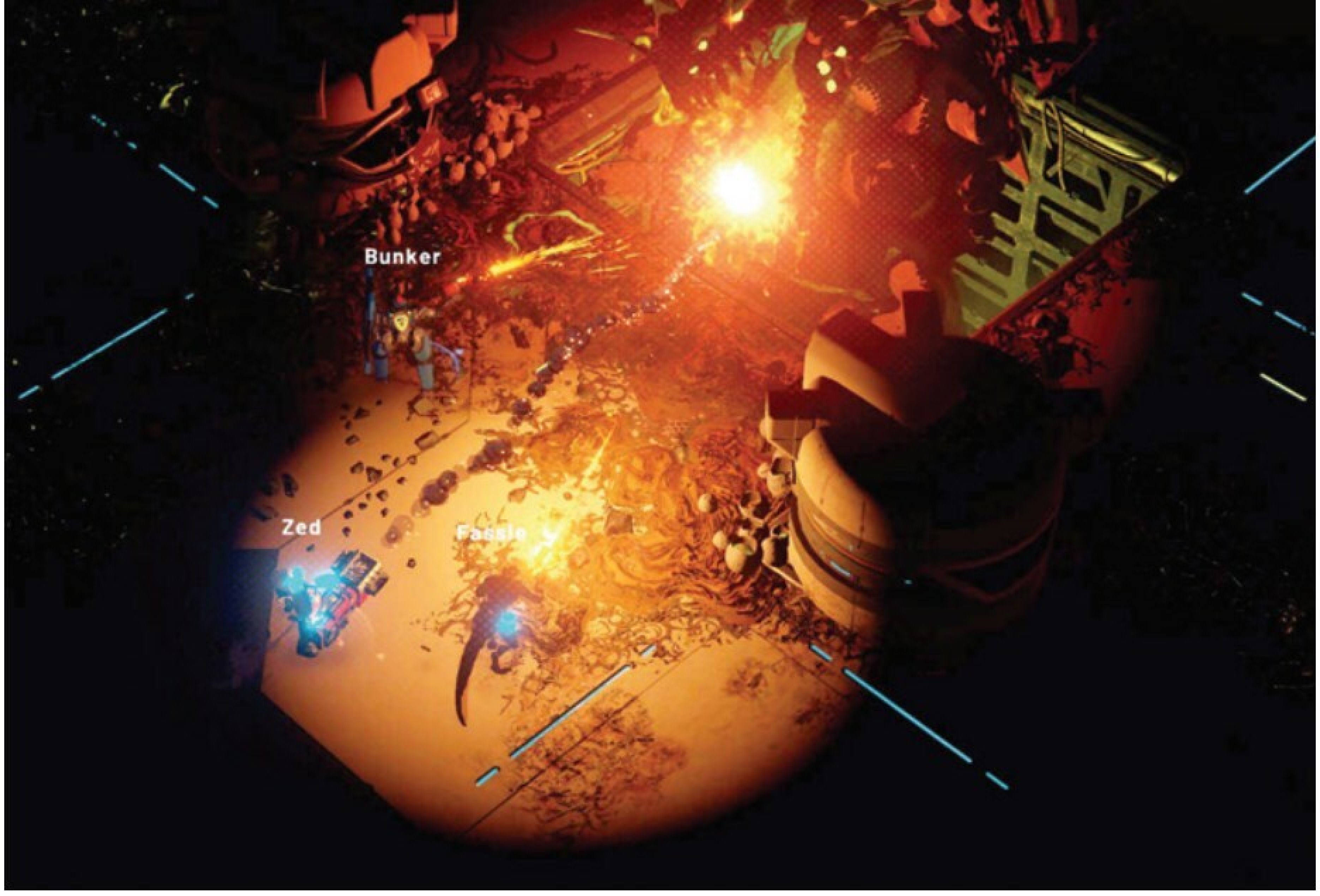
The most impressive element of Dead Island 2 is the level of detail in its environments and the stories you can pick up just by walking through them. I don't usually read the journals left behind in these sorts of games but found myself compelled to here to answer the questions I had about whose trailer I was in or why the studio had a merch table set up.

"Something that we've really tried to add to all our levels is environmental storytelling, a backstory of what was happening before the outbreak," Duckett says. "And that comes across as well in the zombie attire. Full credit to the narrative and environment art teams there. The synergy and the collaboration between the two has meant that we've got really nice pockets of real-world experiences."

The team behind Dead Island 2 has walked a long road to get to where it is today, and it feels like that journey was worth the wait. I'm excited to get my hands on more characters, more weapons, and more of the detailed, story-rich environments when it's released on April 21.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Dambuster Studios **RELEASE** April 21



ENDLESS DUNGEON

A rogue-lite and a tower defense walk into an Old West space saloon

In screenshots, Endless Dungeon looks familiar. A twin-stick shooter taking place on a mysterious space station. But after playing the game at a recent event, it's clear there's more to it than that. "We wanted to try something a bit foolish and mix some genres," developer Amplitude Studios' co-founder and general manager Romain De Waubert says. That mix up in question? Rogue-lites and tower defense games.

Endless Dungeon takes place in Ampitude's Endless universe, which has been the narrative platform for a number of its games. In it, space explorers get pulled toward a mysterious space station that was created long ago by an ancient and powerful race of aliens. Once on the space station, these explorers find themselves stuck in a loop. If they die while exploring the ship, they are inexplicably reborn in the station's saloon to attempt another run, explore the station further, and hopefully find an exit.

In practice, this means picking one of the many space explorers who are stuck in the station, teaming up with a partner, and venturing into the unknown. During my session, I played as a heavily armored humanoid woman named Zed, who was quick but also had access to heavy weapons. Other options included a security robot with tank abilities, a mushroom alien who was mainly a support character, a bartender who specialized in making support cocktails to share with co-op partners, and many more. Moment-to-moment combat should feel familiar to anyone who has played a twin-stick shooter, but the tower defense additions add some interesting wrinkles.

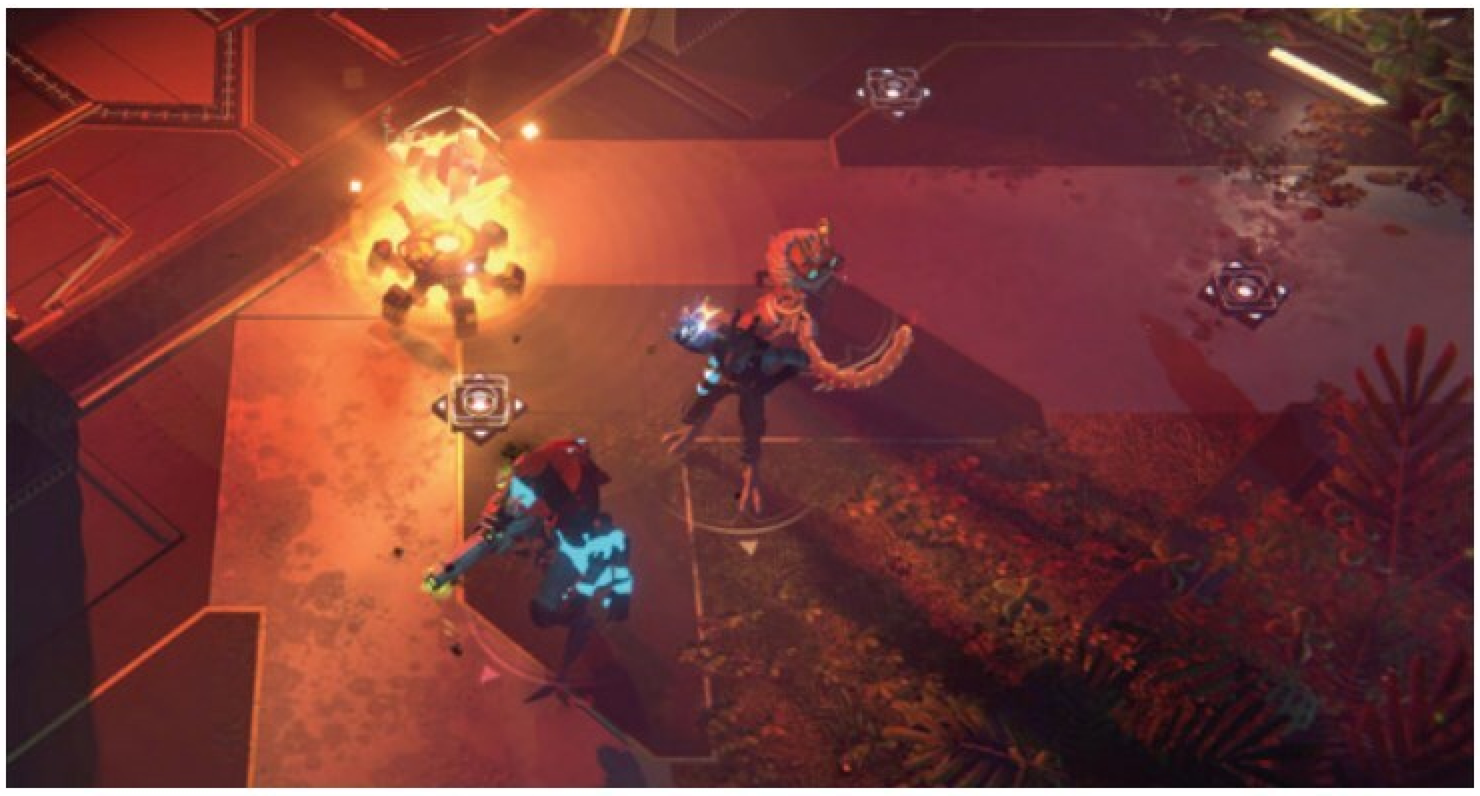
Littered across every room of the station are nodes where you can place turrets that do assorted types of damage. Initially, you explore rooms and try to find upgrades, new weapons, and stations that will generate various currencies to increase the power and number of turrets that can be placed. The more you explore, however, the more you will find new outlets for waves of enemies. At a certain point, you will find an exit to take you to the next area, and you have to tell a mobile crystal that you left near the entrance that it's time to move in that direction. As the crystal moves to the exit, you must defend it and ensure all the turrets you placed leading up to that point are well-positioned to help you make it to the next level.

My play session wavered between going smoothly and sudden, drastic turns toward disaster. The combination of the two genres did a good job of feeling both unique and familiar, which is challenging to balance, and something Amplitude hopes will appeal to multiple levels of players. "Mixing the two – I think was fun to see something a bit more casual [mixed with] something a bit more hardcore, and see how it will work together," De Waubert says.

Alongside the interesting mash-up of genres, Endless Dungeon also features a mash-up of cowboy western and sci-fi aesthetics. You're stuck in a space station, but your downtime is spent in a saloon while a woman sings melancholy music in the corner. "When we thought about these adventurers, and when we thought about where they should go when they would spawn back to life, I think for many of us – or some of us, I will not say everyone – but if I were to die and be reborn again, where would you want to be reborn again," DeWaubert asks. "In the bar!" And that became the first domino that eventually influenced the western idea and setting for the cast of characters.

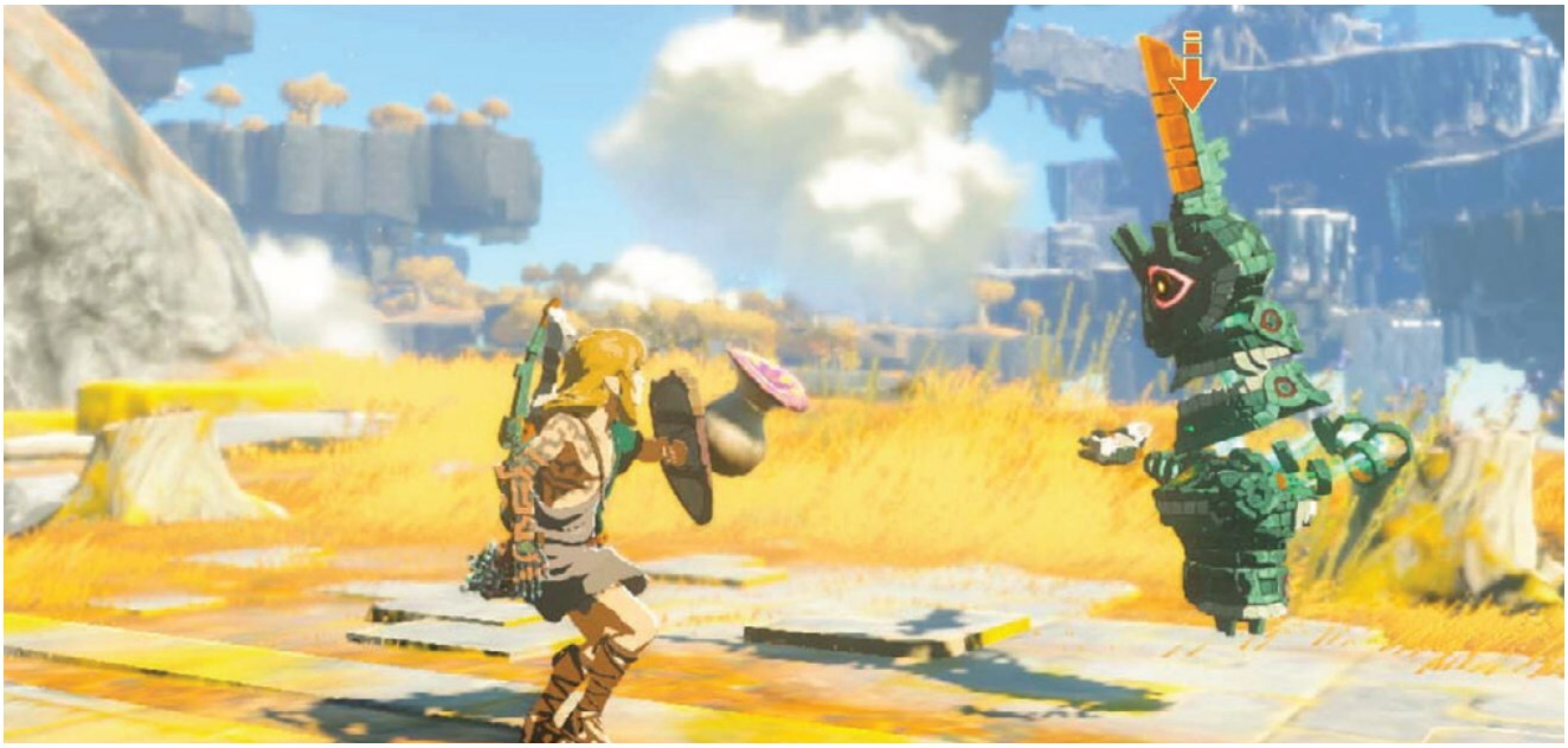
Amplitude Studios has a good track record with its Endless games, which are well-liked among fans. Endless Dungeon will be the fifth in the series, and it's not the studio's first rogue game, which inspires additional confidence. Despite existing as part of a larger fiction, there is a good chance this will mark the introduction to the franchise for many, and our early impressions are so far positive. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 3-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Amplitude Studios **RELEASE** May 18



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

A multitude of possibilities



One of the best things about The Legend of Zelda: Breath of Wild was how its systems interacted, allowing players to concoct many improvised tricks and solutions. Whether tying inflatable octopuses to rafts to create floating platforms or guiding electricity to a power source by laying down a trail of metallic weapons, players are still coming up with fun ways to "break" the game to this day. That's why it's so exciting to see that Tears of the Kingdom ostensibly retains this flexibility and greatly expands upon it thanks to four powerful new abilities.

First up is Recall, the official name of the time manipulation mechanic teased in previous trailers. This ability lets Link rewind an object's movement, which is useful for puzzle-solving and transportation. One significant example shown in a recent gameplay demo was using Recall on a large rock that had fallen from the sky. After climbing atop the rock, it ascends back where it came from, carrying Link into the massive collection of floating islands high above Hyrule. By the way, Link can seamlessly travel from the earth to the sky (and vice versa) without load times.

Nintendo confirmed that the polarizing weapon degradation returns in Tears of the Kingdom, but Link's Fuse ability should help alleviate that limitation. Players can now combine items to make their own weapons, such as fusing a branch with a boulder to create an oversized hammer. One cool trick is to infuse arrows with a Keese eyeball to turn them into homing arrows. Instead of fiddling with menus, players can aim at any object that piques their curiosity, hit a button, and it'll instantly fuse with whatever they're currently holding. The same applies to shields; we watched Link stick a puff shroom to his that exploded into a smokescreen when struck.

Similarly to Fuse, the Ultrahand ability allows players to attach larger objects to create makeshift vehicles, such as rafts, cars, and flying machines. You can power these vessels by adding motorized fans, wheels, and other forms of propulsion. Though you can still travel on horseback, getting to soar the world on a wacky flying contraption sounds thrilling.

Lastly, Ascend is a new traversal power that lets Link teleport through certain ceilings to reach the other side. This applies to mountains, meaning players can enter caves and use Ascend to warp to the summit, sparing their stamina meters. It could also be a shortcut to exit dungeons and other enclosed areas.

These additions look to add a staggering amount of strategy, resourcefulness, and creativity to a game already chock full of it. On the one hand, it's intimidating to think of all the potential options at our fingertips. On the other, having even more agency in deciding how we explore and fight monsters has us itching to tinker with these features. We also can't wait to admire whatever cool ideas fans dream up. Despite many similarities to its predecessor, Tears of the Kingdom feels much more like its own game and a more substantial step forward.

We look forward to discovering the full potential of these features when the game launches on May 12.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** May 12

REDFALL

Staking out New England

A looming, suspended wall of ocean water traps the residents of Redfall, Massachusetts, a cozy island town now overrun by vampires and their cult of familiars. Arkane Studios, best known for creating the acclaimed Dishonored and Deathloop, has made a name for itself realizing game worlds with rich environmental storytelling and curious, interweaving levels. Its approach to developing Redfall is the same. A blacked-out sun darkens the harbor's twisting landscape – one of Redfall's two open-world maps – empowering the monsters to haunt old groceries, canyon-like riverbeds, and foreboding mansions ravaged by failed science experiments. Each locale begs you to explore it.

You and up to three other friends play as one of four survivors: Remi and her robotic companion Bribón, cryptozoologist Devinder, a sniper with a psychic eye named Jacob, and Layla, a biomedical engineer who gained telekinetic powers after a medical trial gone wrong. While the four protagonists have unique abilities designed to complement a larger team, developer Arkane Austin created each to be viable for solo play.

I love Layla's traversal ability, a ghostly lift that propels teammates into the air, and her ultimate ability called Vampire Ex-Boyfriend, which summons a spectral lover that tears through enemies on her behalf. Jacob is probably the most vanilla of the main characters, but I felt at home in Arkane's environments with his scouting abilities and stealth-focused gameplay.

During my 90-minute session, I explore the world, complete a few side missions, and chase after a primary story mission. After speaking to a townsperson at the survivors' hideout, I decide to chase down a machine part at the local theater to fix the popcorn maker at our home base. On the way to my destination, I encounter a particular vampire type, The Angler, which scares the hell out of me as it turns invisible, reappears in another location, and pulls me towards it with its hook-like arm. Unloading my assault rifle clip into the anomaly, I remember standard weaponry can't kill a vampire, only stun them, so I switch to the Stake Launcher – an armament that fires scavenged projectiles from the environment – to destroy The Angler.

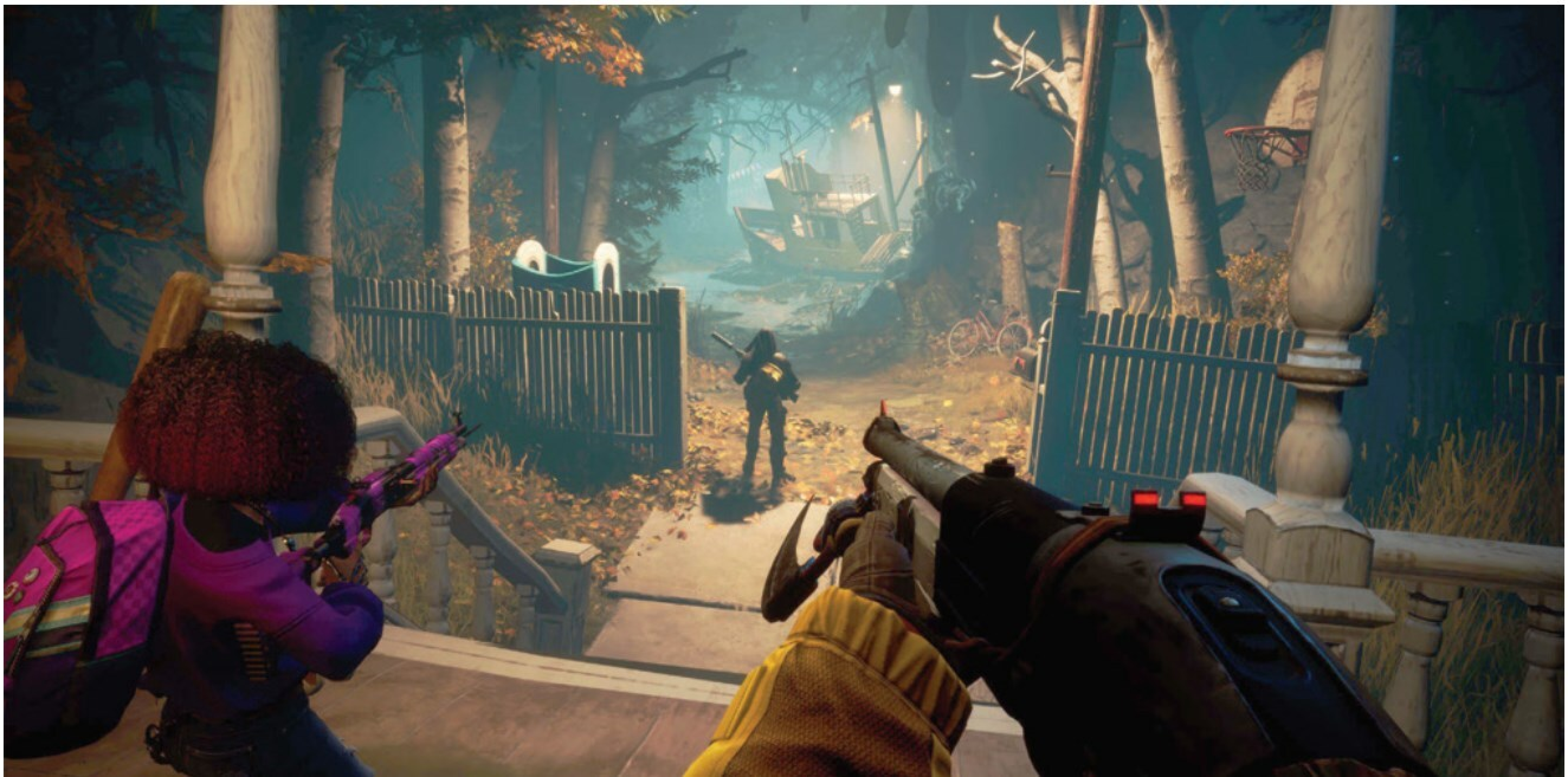
After sneaking by a group of cultists in the street, I enter the theater's foyer through the front door. Later, I'll learn that a rooftop entrance allows perceptive players to climb onto the catwalk above the stage, granting a height advantage against the monsters patrolling below. Unable to spot the machine part at the snack counter, I presume it must be in a storage room. I sweep the top floor and find nothing, so I cautiously sneak down a stairwell, inching closer to the screeches of an enraged vampire below. A fight breaks out with the levitating being, malevolent blue energy swirling around its body. Panicking at my bullets' minor damage, I again switch to the Stake Launcher – it's quickly becoming my favorite weapon – and tear into the beast.

The vampire's ashes disperse, revealing a key on the ground that unlocks the building's walk-in freezer. Before this new curiosity distracts from my original mission, I find the popcorn maker part in the next room, finally satisfying the side quest's criteria. The freezer is now in my line of sight, attached to the basement's far wall, and after opening it, I discover a group of tied-up survivors and a cache containing a rare rifle.

As a long-time fan of Arkane's single-player worlds, I was concerned Redfall's commitment to cooperative play would sap my enjoyment of exploring the game world. However, my worries have dissipated after playing the game solo, and I'm eager to continue discovering how the vampires and their gods usurp New England. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

Learn more about Redfall in our interview with Arkane's Harvey Smith on The Game Informer Show

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Arkane Austin **RELEASE** May 2



LEGO 2K DRIVE

A refreshing kickstart

In Lego 2K Drive, it feels like Visual Concepts, best known for its annual work on 2K's WWE and NBA franchises, took the humor and visuals we've come to know of the various Lego franchises and applied them to the open-world racing formula popularized by the Forza Horizon series and Need For Speed. But within that open world are races reminiscent of Mario Kart, as well as quests, collectibles, and more that make Lego 2K Drive feel fresh. It's clear what Visual Concepts' inspirations are, but Lego 2K Drive feels decidedly like its own thing. And if my two-hour hands-on preview is any indication, it's a game worth watching as it nears closer to the finish line this May.

Immediately, Lego 2K Drive feels like a Lego game, visually, creatively, and comedically. It features well-rounded humor that works great for adults and children. And the lifelike bricks seen in other Lego games return here and look as good as ever.

I especially like that most objects, be it other vehicles, shrubbery, fences, and anything that isn't a major piece of the landscape, have a physics system attached to each brick that realistically causes things to react to hits. When a homing missile hits your vehicle, not unlike Mario Kart's red shell, bricks fly off. And bricks snap back into place as you collect more by racing through breakable objects like fences and trees. This heightened my enjoyment while racing through various themed tracks, like one where a UFO shot lasers onto the track or another where exploding pumpkins bounced spookily through a haunted house-like trail.

Most important is the sense of randomness and subsequent challenge. Each race felt like a thrilling gauntlet from 8th to 1st place, where I had to utilize drifting, turbo, and items to advance. These races are fun and feel well-balanced. When up against NPCs, I rarely came in anything but first place, but I had to work for it, and I imagine younger, less experienced racers will find even more fun in the challenge. Even when I wasn't winning, I was having a good time because of the game's satisfying brick-building animations. Something that separates Lego 2K Drive from other games is that everything's made of Legos, and the gameplay is built around that. I love that based on the terrain, my vehicle would transform from a racing car to an offroad vehicle to a boat and back, each with fast-paced and beautiful Lego building animations.

The races are the clear highlight of Lego 2K Drive, but its open world features plenty of good fun thanks to various quests, minigames, and more. After leaving the Turbo Acres tutorial area, themed like a racing-eccentric town, I went to Big Butte, a Grand Canyon-esque area reminiscent of Cars' Radiator Springs. Here, I discovered quests that forced me to slow down and take in the scenery, literally, as I had to find a Bricklandia

citizen wearing bunny ears by a food truck in the city. This wasn't easy either because Bricklandia is filled with numerous NPCs and buildings – restaurants, busy crosswalks, food truck festivals, department stores, and more. The efforts put into making the two areas I visited feel lived-in by Lego people are impressive. It's an element of open worlds Lego 2K Drive has up on its competition so far.

After testing out six-player co-op, which was good fun but a system I'll likely ignore as it's party-up only with no matchmaking, my preview concluded with a look at the Garage. Here, you can build your vehicles from the ground up using hundreds of bricks, each customizable with paints, stickers, and more. I noticed different builds handled uniquely, and I suspect my neon pink monstrosity that looked more like a parade float than something that could cross a finish line wouldn't stand a chance to the Batmobiles and pirate ships I'm sure more skilled players will be building in-game.

With few expectations going in, I was surprised by Visual Concepts' first go at a Lego racing game. Lego 2K Drive isn't just a racing game, though – it's the start of a multi-title partnership between Lego and 2K, and if this is the first game to come out of that collaboration, I'm excited to see what 2K's planning for down the road. Lego 2K Drive uses series we love, like Forza Horizon and Mario Kart, as inspiration to create something familiar but new. It's a racing game built with "everyone" in mind, and I'm excited to play more in May to see just how well the final creation caters to drivers of all ages. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Racing (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K
DEVELOPER Visual Concepts **RELEASE** May 19

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SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

The hard sell

Rocksteady Studios, the developer of the Batman: Arkham trilogy, recently pulled the curtain back on its long-awaited follow-up, Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League. A recent PlayStation State of Play presentation provided the most in-depth look at the game's co-op shooting action and confirmed its rumored (and polarizing) live service elements.

Suicide Squad occurs five years after Batman: Arkham Knight and centers on our villains turned government-mandated saviors – Harley Quinn, Deadshot, King Shark, and Captain Boomerang – fighting to stop a global invasion by Brainiac. The powerful foe has taken over Metropolis and brainwashed the Justice League into doing his bidding. With few options left, Suicide Squad boss Amanda Waller has tasked the Squad with saving the day, which includes permanently eliminating the League.

As previously revealed, you can rampage through Metropolis alone with A.I. companions that you swap between on the fly or play with up to three friends in four-player co-op. Suicide Squad also supports cross-play. Each character sports individual tricks and traits for fighting and traversing the large city. The agile Harley Quinn can swing across the sky using a grappling hook. Captain Boomerang harnesses the power of the speed force with a gauntlet that lets him zip around in the blink of an eye. Deadshot soars the skies on a jetpack to snipe enemies from above, while King Shark uses his brutish strength to leap around and pummel foes into dust. Watching these villains jump across rooftops, launching themselves to absurd heights, and blowing apart aliens using explosive weaponry gives off heavy Crackdown vibes, and we're not necessarily complaining.

As a third-person loot-based shooter, each character wields various customizable firearms, such as assault rifles, shotguns, SMGs, and sniper rifles. Taking a page from the Borderlands playbook, Suicide Squad features different weapon manufacturers, such as Lex Corp and the GCPD. Players can outfit guns with attachable upgrades such as sniper scopes to mold them into their preferred playstyle. Additionally, the Squad can be outfitted with different gear sets that grant various perks.

For example, wearing an outfit themed after Bane lets characters perform powerful, venom-based attacks. Other ensembles allow the Squad to essentially cosplay as superheroes, such as Superman and Wonder Woman. Equipping stronger variations of weapons and armor raises a character's gear score, and you'll eventually be able to create unique character builds to deal with different situations.

Of course, the elephant in the room is Suicide Squad's live service structure. Rocksteady confirmed the game has a battle pass that only features cosmetic unlocks. It has free and paid premium tiers, but the studio emphasizes that these optional rewards do not affect gameplay. Perhaps most concerning to players, however, is the game's requirement of a constant internet connection, even while playing solo. Although that's the reality of many modern games, the recent shutdowns of other live-service titles have players spooked that Suicide Squad is living on borrowed time no matter how successful it is.

Rocksteady has an incredible pedigree, but it is climbing an uphill battle to prove to fans that Suicide Squad isn't just another trend-chasing live-service loot shooter. The action looks enjoyable if uninspired, and we hope the narrative delivers, given Rocksteady's exceptional work on the Arkham stories. Overcoming players' skepticism will be as challenging as toppling Superman, and we'll see if Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League is up to the task when it launches on May 26. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios **RELEASE** May 26

TEKKEN 8

Aggression meets grace

It's been more than eight years since Tekken 7 arrived in arcades. While the console version didn't hit for another two years, the gap since that seventh entry represents the largest distance between two mainline entries since the series began in 1994. Bandai Namco used that time to evolve the experience, adding several new characters through DLC en route to announcing a highly anticipated eighth entry.

Tekken 8 brings forward many of its predecessor's successful conventions and mechanics but does so in a way that forges its own identity. Executive producer Katsuhiro Harada and his team settled on a theme of aggression to differentiate this version. While players can still block and sidestep incoming attacks, Tekken 8 does its best to encourage players to go on the offensive. This is not only to create a more frenetic, offensive experience for players but a more visually appealing spectator sport for people watching streamers or tournaments like Evo.

Bandai Namco has evolved some mechanics from past Tekken games while introducing an all-new new one to push players to be aggressive. The Rage system returns from Tekken 7, giving players a cinematic move once they have low health; for Tekken 8, these Rage Art moves are triggered by the same button input for each character.

On top of that, players can also engage with the debuting Heat system. Once a character is in a Heat status, all their attacks are more effective. They also have access to Heat Smash attacks and Heat Dash movements, which consume the Heat bar. Typically, Heat status lasts about 10 seconds, but the effect can be extended through attacking your opponent, delivering on that theme of aggression.

Tekken 8 also signals the return of the recoverable gauge in health bars, meaning that if you take damage, a small portion of the health bar remains white. Because Bandai Namco wants this to be a more offensive-facing experience, the game doesn't reward health for avoiding your opponent, but rather by mounting offense.

Tekken 8 is the latest fighting game to offer different control schemes to suit different skill levels. Arcade Style allows for classic Tekken gameplay, letting longtime players feel at home. Meanwhile, the new Special Style is intended for more casual play. This control scheme lets you chain together masterful combos without needing to learn inputs of characters with whom you're unfamiliar. The developers see this as a potentially favorite way for people to play long-term or to learn a new character before switching to Arcade Style. However, the trade-off is that you don't have access to the full moveset in Special Style.

In motion, Tekken 8 feels great. The smooth, quick fighting styles of Law and the newly announced Xiaoyu perfectly contrast the hulking brute styles of Paul and Jack-8. The Rage system is a great weapon in your back pocket if the deck feels stacked against you – I only wish there was more diversity in the animations, so I didn't have to sit through the exact same cinematic attacks each round, gorgeous as they are. More than the Rage Arts, I loved waiting until the right moment to activate Heat each round; reacting to my opponent's Heat activation and vice-versa made each round look fascinating.

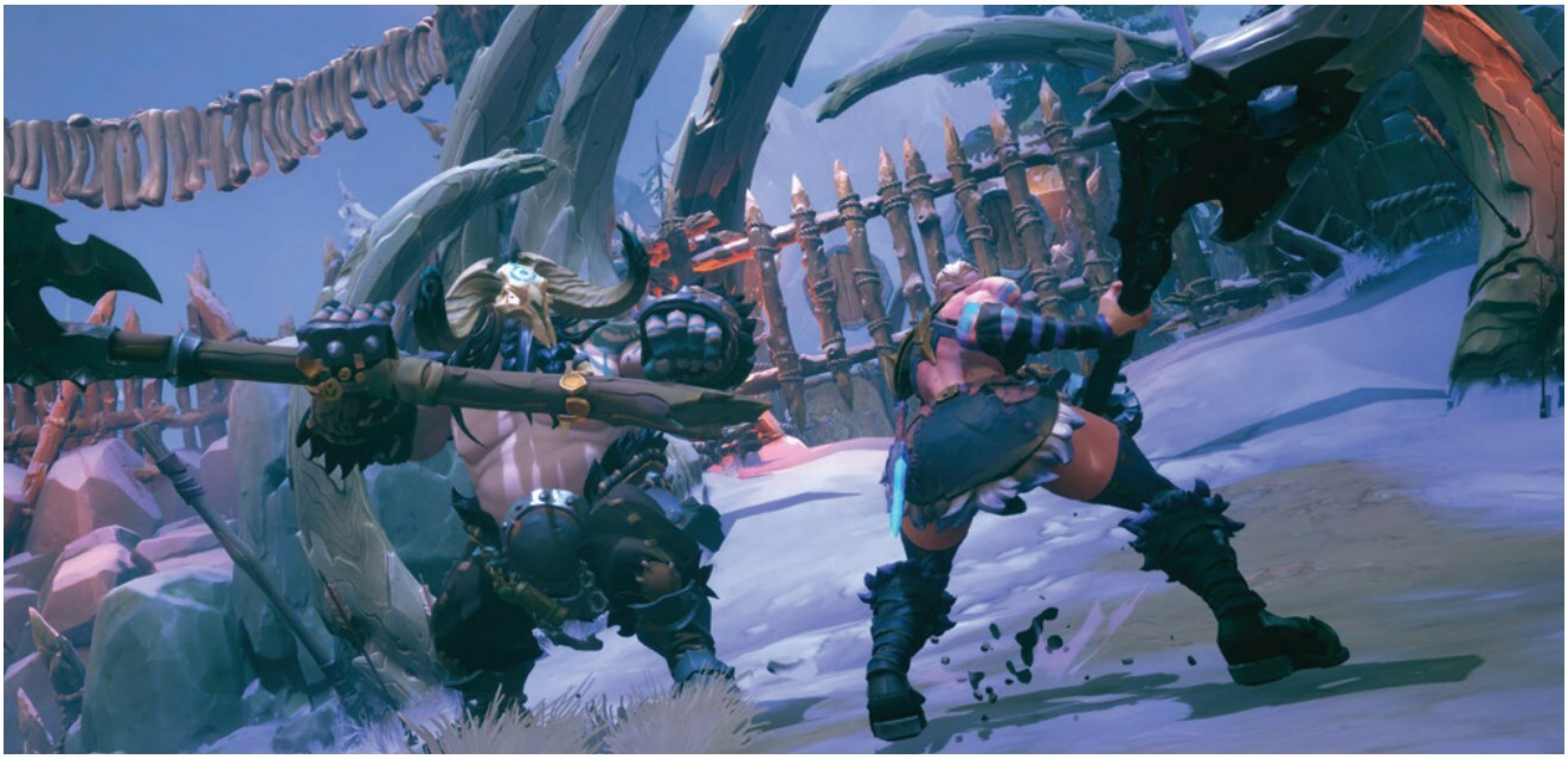
I mostly stuck with the Arcade Style control scheme, but the assistance Special Style provides to players is immediately noticeable and immense. It's possible I'll eventually learn best practices for countering Special Style players, but it feels like a powerful way to tilt the odds in your favor.

My first hands-on experience with Tekken 8 was impressive; the fighting mechanics are mechanically sound and fun. But I'm perhaps most excited to see how the modes and offerings will fill out. We'll need to wait a bit longer to see how Tekken 8 shapes up, but for now, one of the sole remaining triple-A 3D fighting game franchises shows no signs of slowing down with age. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco **RELEASE** TBA

WAYFINDER

An MMO-lite with Darksiders DNA



The world of massively multiplayer online action games is a competitive one. Ambitious games with bigger budgets have failed to crack the secret that games like Destiny have managed to figure out, but that hasn't deterred Airship Syndicate from entering the space with Wayfinder, its free-to-play fantasy melee action game. In Wayfinder, players choose from classes, or the titular Wayfinders, to tackle something called the Gloom that's overtaken the world.

Airship Syndicate has, so far, mainly focused on single-player RPGs. Its journey began with Battle Chasers: Nightwar, a continuation of the comic book series studio founder Joe Madureira created in 1998. The studio also released the recent Ruined King: A League of Legends Story, another single-player RPG, but between those two games, it released, arguably, the game most relevant to Wayfinder: Darksiders: Genesis. Before Airship Syndicate, Madureira co-founded Vigil Games where he helped create Darksiders and co-directed the first two games. Darksiders is no longer under Madureira's purview, but as is clear with Darksiders: Genesis, which featured an online co-op campaign with RPG elements inside Darksiders' world, he remains involved with the franchise when the opportunity presents itself.

In Wayfinder's universe, the Gloom has crept into the world and eventually makes its way to the planet's most populated city where it manages to kill its greatest heroes. Wayfinder begins with magic bringing those defeated heroes back to life to start the fight again.

During my hands-on experience, I chose to bring Niss back to life. Niss is a fast character who dodges frequently and attacks quickly with two swords. She appealed to my favorite kind of playstyle where I could move in to attack quickly and move out of the way just as fast. There's a little more range in combat speed with characters like Niss that use short, high-speed dual swords, but there are also Wayfinders that hold giant heavy swords with two hands and sword and shield characters that land somewhere in the middle. There will be plenty of options at launch, along with plans to add more Wayfinders in the future.

I joined Airship Syndicate to make my way through a series of mines toward a boss. We encountered smaller enemies and even some larger mini-bosses along the way, working as a team to attack them in in real time. The combat is reminiscent of Darksiders' speed and heft. Every Wayfinder feels and looks like they hit hard and fast, just like War, Death, and Fury did in the three main Darksiders games. We lacked a healer, which led to ruin at the boss, but it highlighted the importance of team make-up and cooperative play.

Another interesting wrinkle is that the story integrates multiverses into the lore to explain why multiple versions of the same Wayfinders exist and contextualize why you can tackle the same level and encounter different obstacles every time. It's a small touch to explain away something we typically take for granted in comparable games, but I appreciate the attention to detail.

"We aspire someday to feel like an MMO," Madureira says, "It's definitely not an MMO right now. It's MMO-lite." Airship recognizes it has some catching up to do in terms of the content with comparable games, but it is eager to take on the challenge and work with the community to create it. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC
STYLE Online Multiplayer Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Digital Extremes
DEVELOPER Airship Syndicate
RELEASE 2023

HUMANITY

Herd mentality

Humanity has captivated my imagination for years after its first trailer showed thousands of people mindlessly marching off cliffs in a stark abstract world. After years of radio silence, this unique puzzle game by famed visual designer Yugo Nakamura and developer Tetsuya Mizuguchi (Tetris Effect, Rez) is on track to release this summer, and playing a recent demo only elevated my excitement.

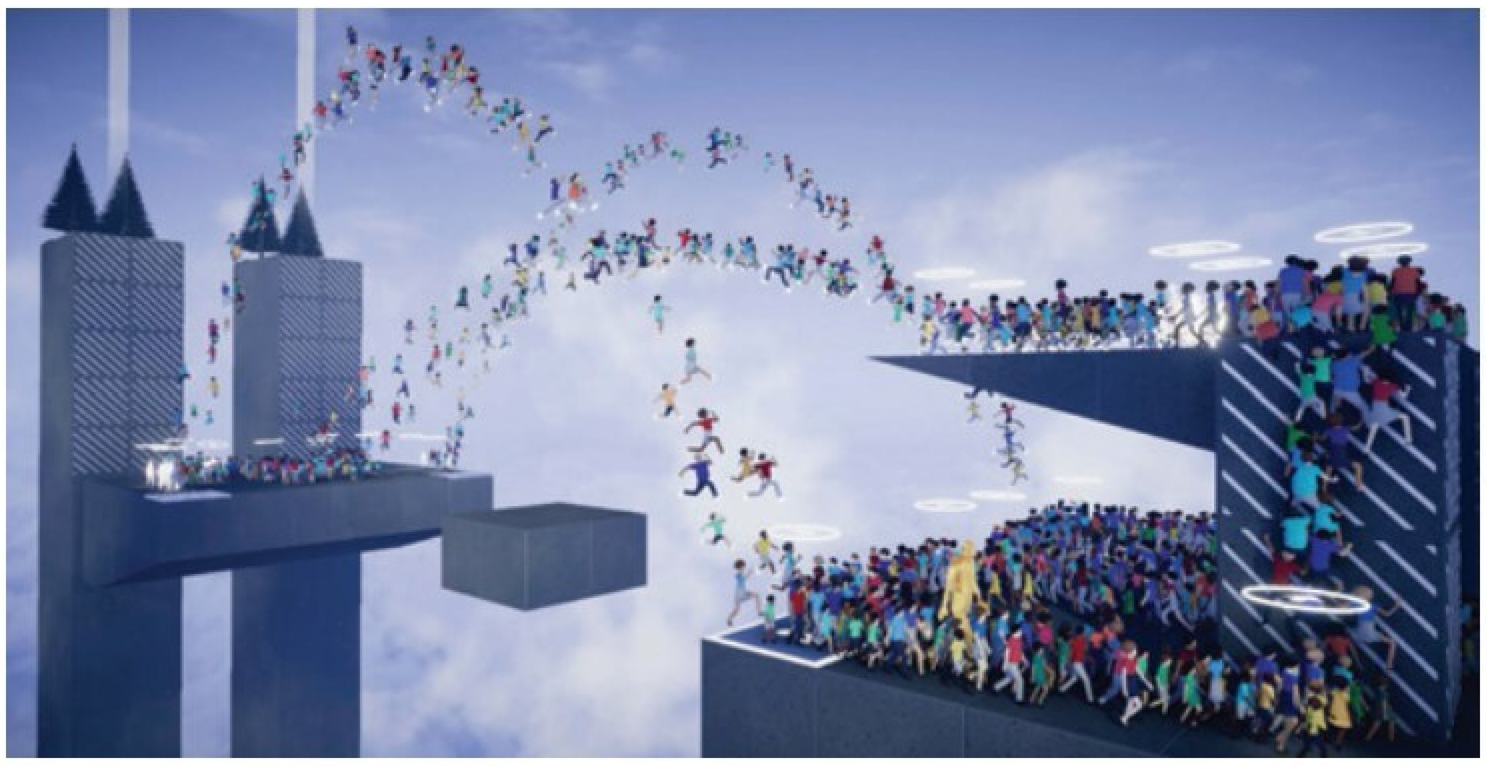
You control an ethereal dog, and each level tasks you with shepherding hundreds of people to an end goal. Placing simple commands on floors dictate how the colorful mob behaves; for example, arrows make them change direction, and a jump lets them leap over gaps and objects. Despite controlling the dog as you would in a platformer, playing Humanity really feels like a more active form of programming as you're setting strings of commands and watching them play out in real time. It's easy to spend several minutes analyzing the floating stages and mentally mapping out the correct path. You can also have the humans climb particular walls, push blocks, or swim through suspended bodies of water.

Since there's no penalty for losing people, watching them pour over the edge like a human river into the void below is satisfying as a pure technical showcase. Certain levels have golden idols, which are large statues that march alongside humans when collected. Safely transporting these giants to the goal counts as a bonus, and they permanently disappear if they fall, forcing a restart if you want to grab them. Rival, colorless humans called The Others occupy some stages and steal the idol when you try to march through them, forcing you to find ways to circumvent them. Though there's no scoring system or obvious incentive for capturing these idols, I still went out of my way to retrieve them because of the fun challenge and personal satisfaction of pulling it off.

If you like Humanity's stages but think you can do better, a level editor lets you build courses that can emphasize action, puzzle-solving, or simply look cool. Creations can be shared online for others to enjoy, and a library of user-created content lets you rate your favorites.

Humanity is a hypnotic brain teaser that is as fun to unravel as it is to gawk at. The game is also playable in VR, and I'd love to know how the experience feels in that environment. We'll be lining up to find out when Humanity finally arrives this May. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PSVR2 • PS4 • PSVR • PC
STYLE 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Enhance **DEVELOPER** Tha Ltd.
RELEASE May



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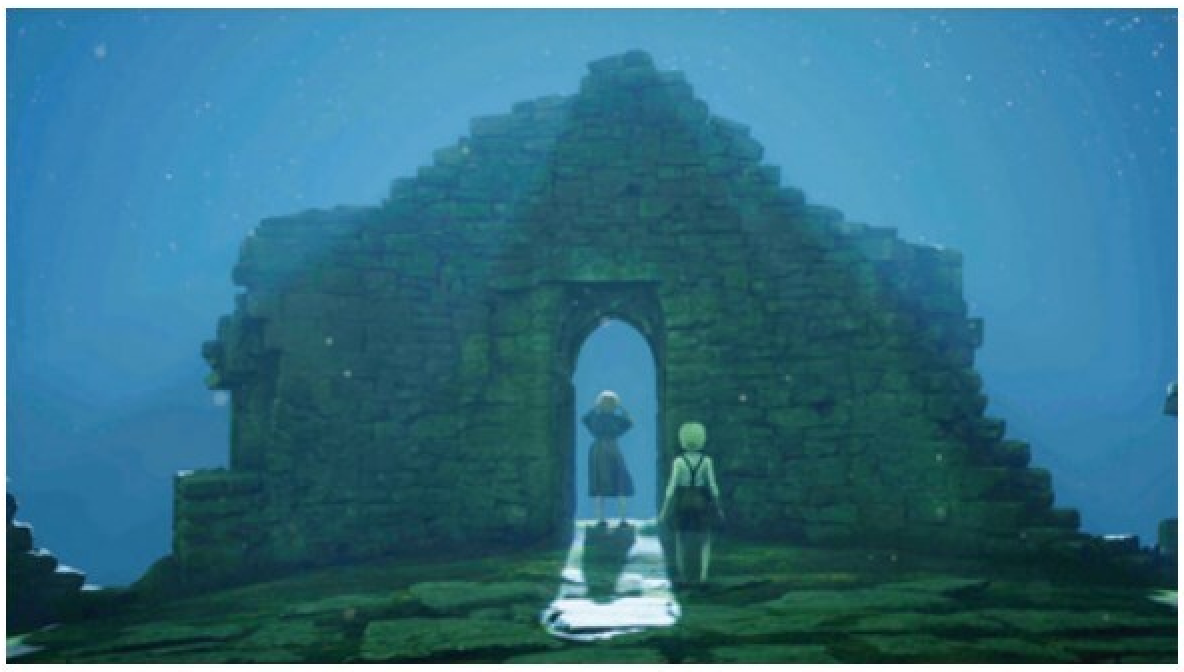
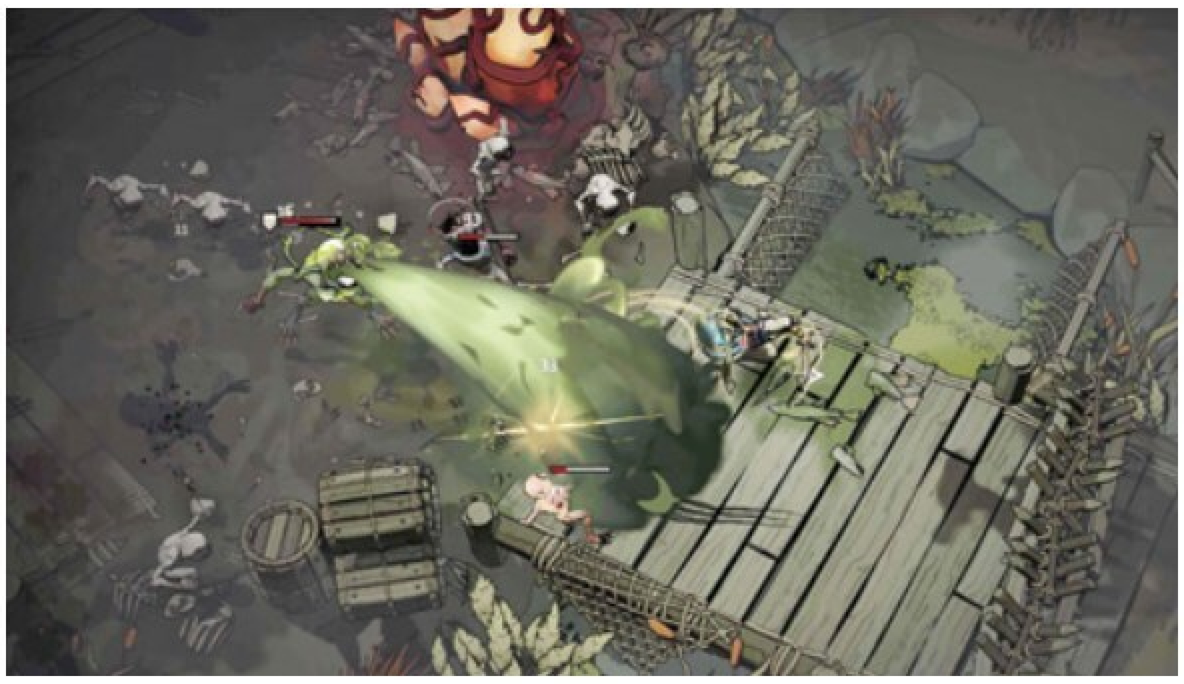
BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING

Bramble: The Mountain King is an upcoming adventure platformer following a young boy exploring the land of Bramble to rescue his sister. Along the way, you'll encounter deadly creatures, a Norse fairytale-esque world to platform and puzzle-solve your way through, and more. A unique storybook-like visual style and a Nordic chorus-backed score complete the package, making Bramble a game we can't wait to check out this month. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Merge Games
DEVELOPER Dimfrost Studio **RELEASE** April 27

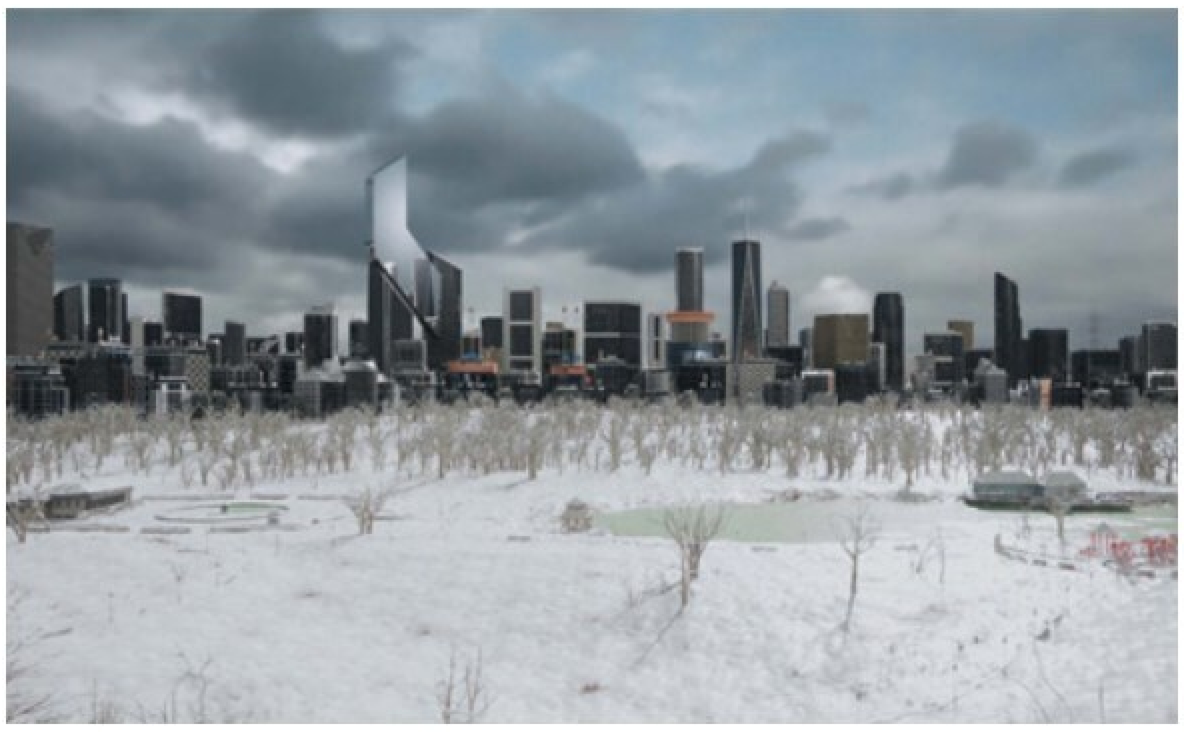


RAVENSWATCH

Passtech Games, the creators of 2021's Curse of the Dead Gods, are back with another roguelike called Ravenswatch. Nightmares are spreading through the land of Reverie, and it's up to you to stop them. But you don't have to go it alone because Ravenswatch features co-op with up to three other players. The top-down, fast-paced action of Ravenswatch looks engaging, and we can't wait to watch its folktale-inspired world change and grow in Early Access. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Naco
DEVELOPER Passtech Games **RELEASE** April 6 (Early Access)

CITIES: SKYLINES II

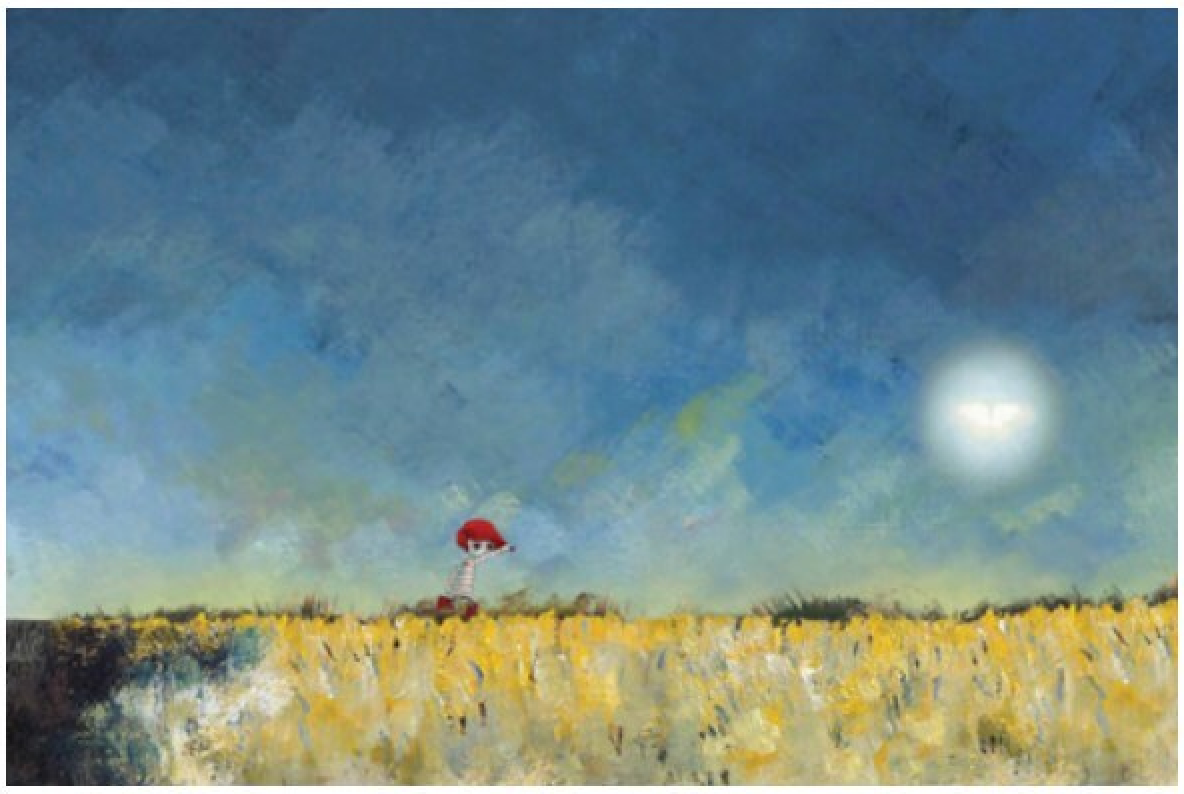


2015's Cities: Skylines moved the city-building simulation genre forward from where SimCity left it, and the sequel looks to build upon its predecessor in new ways. New features, like fully realized transportation and economy systems, and "a wealth of construction and customization options and advanced modding capabilities" look to build this sequel even higher than the city sims that came before it. And fortunately, it's out this year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive **DEVELOPER** Colossal Order Ltd. **RELEASE** 2023

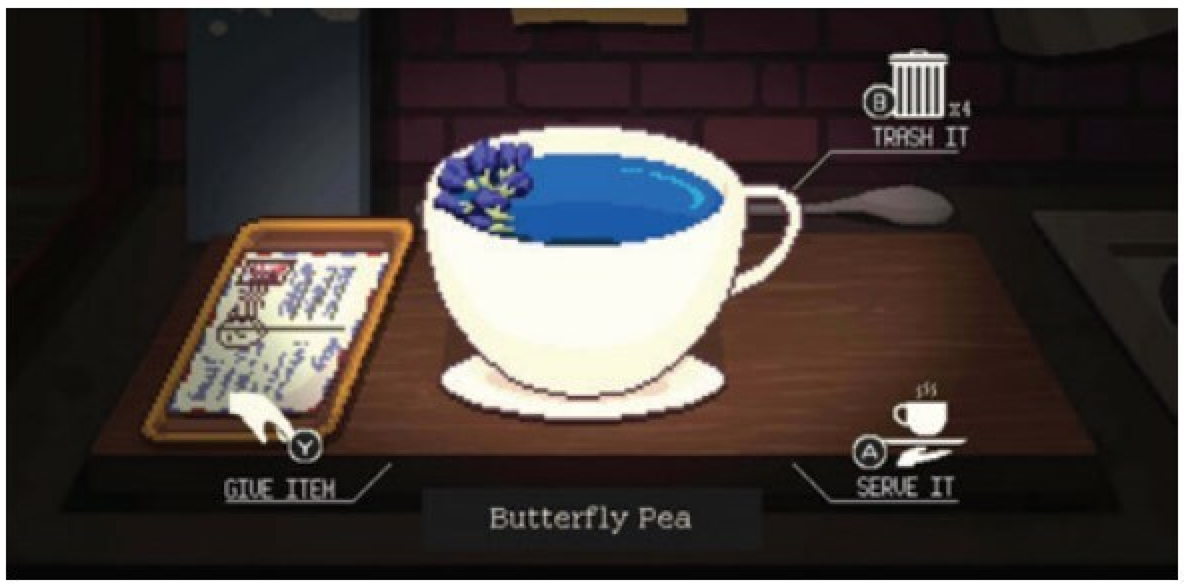
UNLEAVING

Unleaving was only recently revealed, but it's already shot high on our list of games we're excited to play. Mixing a painterly brushstroke art style with Limbo-like platforming and exploration, Unleaving looks set to pull on our heartstrings as its abstract narrative promises to explore the surreal experience of death through a child's eyes. We're not quite sure when we'll be able to play this game, but we can't wait for the day. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



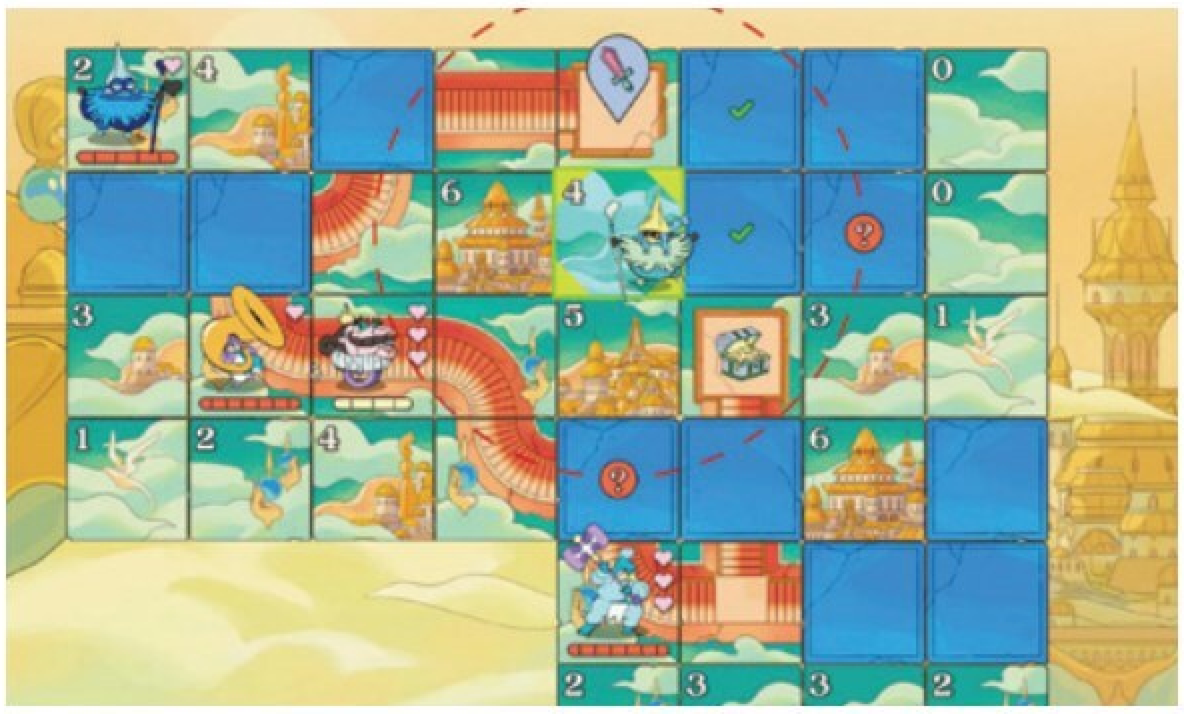
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Platformer **PUBLISHER** Orangutan Matter
DEVELOPER Orangutan Matter **RELEASE** TBA

COFFEE TALK EPISODE 2: HIBISCUS & BUTTERFLY



The original Coffee Talk was a well-liked visual novel where players filled coffee orders for various characters. In the sequel, like the original, you don't make specific dialogue choices. Instead, the story and dialogue move forward based on what kind of coffee orders you fill and how well. It also takes place in a fantasy version of Seattle, so your patrons are ogres and elves alongside regular humans. The sequel offers new characters and stories for your coffee patrons. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Chorus Worldwide
DEVELOPER Toge Productions **RELEASE** April 20



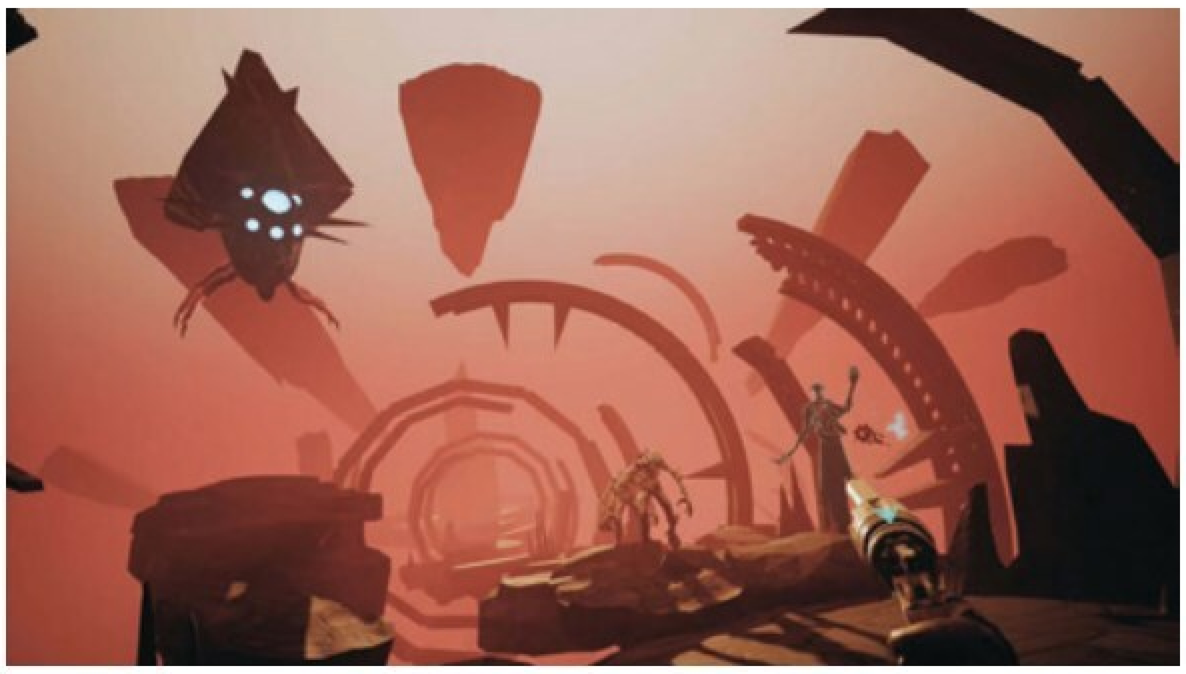
LET'S REVOLUTION

Buck, up until now, has primarily been an animation studio working on various advertisements as well as Netflix's *Love, Death, and Robots*. Let's Revolution is its first video game, and it plays like a strategy game on a Minesweeper board with a little bit of Picross arithmetic logic thrown in. As you might guess, it also plays to Buck's strengths and features charming animation with a story about chasing and overthrowing a terrible king. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Antfood
DEVELOPER Buck **RELEASE** Summer

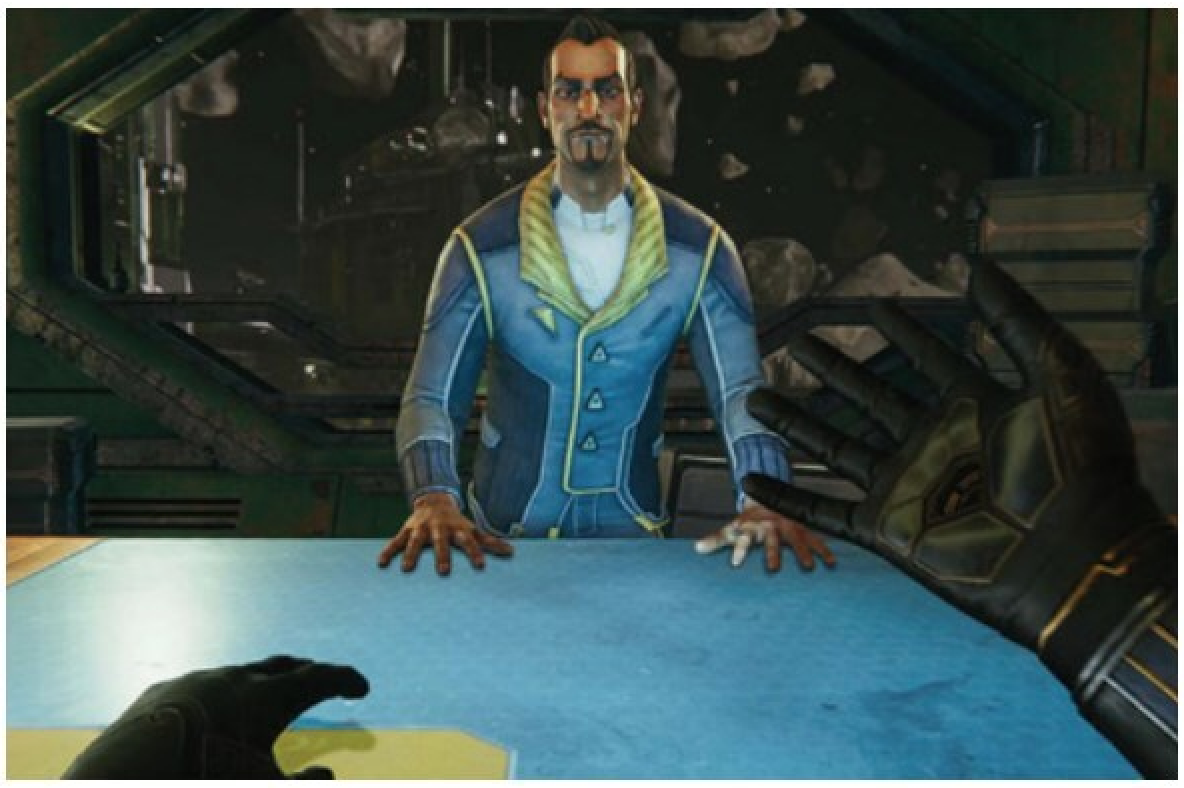
THE FOGLANDS

In this VR roguelike, players take on the role of a Runner as they attempt to explore a mysterious fog at the behest of a skeletal demon who carries a deck of cards that influence their abilities. Foglands has an old-west aesthetic with six-shooters and cowboy boots, but with the addition of monsters that fire magical attacks and more at the player. Footage for the game also shows melee attacks as a perfectly acceptable means of staying alive. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM Meta Quest 2 • PSVR2 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Well Told Entertainment, LLC
DEVELOPER Well Told Entertainment, LLC **RELEASE** 2023

JOURNEY TO FOUNDATION



Based on Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* book series, Journey to Foundation is a VR shooter where players take on the role of a spy trying to prevent, or at the very least, survive, an inevitable war on the verge of breaking out deep in the outreaches of space. Along with shooting action, developer Archiact is also promising substantial player choice that will affect your relationships with the many characters you meet. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

PLATFORM PSVR2 • Meta Quest 2 **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Archiact **DEVELOPER** Archiact **RELEASE** Fall

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GI MUST PLAY

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Refinement, not reinvention

There are two audiences for the Resident Evil 4 remake: those who have played the original, perhaps dozens of times, and people who haven't but want to know what the fuss is about. Let's start with the former: unequivocally, if you are a fan of RE4, you must play the remake.

From the jump, the new RE4 overwhelms you with danger. Running for my life through crowds of nasty folks, while desperately shooting at enemy kneecaps, parrying incoming projectiles, and running in and out of houses was tense in a way this level hasn't been since I was a kid. That the game maintains this pace until the credits roll is a feat.

Gameplay has been expanded, which makes the already-great bones of RE4 feel fresh. I welcomed every major combat encounter. Especially by the time I unlocked the more powerful weapons, blowing through scores of enemies felt fantastic. And don't get me started on the game's brutally gross gore system; blasting off heads and arms has rarely looked this fantastically disgusting.

Perhaps the most elbow grease went into rewriting the game's story, though the narrative beats are largely the same. You play as Leon Kennedy, now a special agent of the United States president sent to a remote Spanish village in search of the president's missing daughter, Ashley Graham. You're soon confronted by scores of angry locals infected by a parasite called Las Plagas, making them easy for the game's main antagonist to control. Leon's nightmare takes him through the remote village, into the bowels of a baroque castle, and finally onto the shores of a military stronghold.

Much of the camp is retained here, but with sharper writing and better characterization. Ashley, in particular, has been rewritten as a real character with emotions, intelligence, and charisma. That other characters don't sexually harass her as they did in the original is also a huge improvement. Across the board, the cast has received an overhaul – all the while never losing the charm the game had in the first place.

I could write a metaphorical book about all the ways I love the RE4 remake, but it might be simplest to tell you to look down at the score and sum it up like this: if you loved RE4 in the past, you will love this remake. What it lacks, however, is context. And that's important.

As great as this remake is, I do not think it will show you why RE4 was so groundbreaking. It just can't. There's no universe where this game will ever be as important as the game it remakes. Somewhat ironically, it's only as good as it is now because it exists in a post-RE4 world. And so, while I think it can show you why RE4 was fun, goofy, and endearing, if you're someone interested in just why this old game has such an enduring legacy, your best bet is to still play the original, to try and put your mind in a pre-RE4 world to understand how that game could change everything. That will make playing the remake a much richer experience; you can see decades of lessons learned throughout the game industry about how to make a third-person action game. It's a refinement, not a reinvention. And that space is the most interesting place this remake can occupy.

The RE4 remake is about everything I could've wanted. But importantly, it doesn't overwrite its predecessor. If anything, this new version reinforces why the original RE4 is a game people should still seek out. But as a love letter to one of the greatest games of all time, this new trek through the Spanish countryside is as good as it gets and makes a great game that much better.

BY BLAKE HESTER

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** March 24 **RATING** M

MUST PLAY

TCHIA

Simply transformative fun

Video games, unfairly simplified, all present a series of virtual tasks that must be performed for progress, and the player must decide if they enjoy doing those tasks. In some ways, Tchia eschews the idea of making you do anything by offering an open, exploration-based game filled with activities where, in nearly every case, completing them is optional. Don't want to play the rhythm game that accompanies cutscenes? Just press the left control stick to make it auto-play. Don't feel like taking your boat? Soul-jump into a bird and just fly to your destination. Want to skip this entire gameplay section? There's an option in the menu to do just that. If, however, you do want to engage in what Tchia has to offer, there is a unique package wrapped up with some well-executed gameplay mechanics that are fun to do throughout the entirety of the relatively short but fulfilling experience.

In Tchia, you explore a magical, fictionalized archipelago heavily inspired by New Caledonia and its traditions. The story follows the titular Tchia and the adventure to save her kidnapped father. The character design is reminiscent of an animated children's TV show, but the movement, especially small, detailed animations like close-ups of hands, are fantastic. The aesthetic also betrays what is, at times, a surprisingly dark tone. The big bad, Meavora, is introduced in such a dark and comically evil way that I both gasped and laughed out loud. Surprising violence occurs, and inappropriate jokes are told, all in contrast to the childlike visuals, and it quickly made me a fan.

Overall, the story is a highlight with fun characters, surprising twists, and a satisfying conclusion, but it makes up an ultimately small part of the game. Most of your time in Tchia is spent turning into different animals to explore the island and find fun in every corner. Tchia can climb every surface and uses a paraglider like Link in Breath of the Wild, and it feels great. Climbing a tree, leaping from the top, and opening your paraglider to land safely on the ground is always fun, and when that isn't moving you fast enough, Tchia's ability to Soul-jump into animals and objects makes moving even better.

Tchia can slow time and leap into every animal in the game, as well as nearly every inanimate object. The best and my most frequently used transformation, however, are the birds. Leaping into a bird, flying to my destination, returning to human form, and paragliding to safety is an action I repeated often and never grew tired of.

Combat does not exist in the traditional sense. Tchia cannot throw a punch, but she can toss flammable objects at cloth enemies in an explosive display. As is the case with most activities in the game, fighting like this is optional, but I was compelled to do it to the point of exhaustion. It was the one instance where I did grow tired of the mechanic after its initial luster wore off.

Tchia is full of joyful, explorative fun. The idea of letting players loose in an interactive sandbox is a goal that has been chased by developers since video games began. Few truly give you the freedom to frolic in a virtual playground, and though Tchia is not without its shortcomings, it's a rare instance where the temptation to just play in the digital world is rewarding at just about every turn. The tone, music, and mechanics all come together to create something that is simply fun, and it all takes place in a setting that demands exploration.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Awaceb **DEVELOPER** Awaceb
RELEASE March 21 **RATING** T

DESTINY 2: LIGHTFALL

Hits and misses

Long-running living games are complicated beasts to wrangle and expand in new directions. After so many years, game modes, prior changes, and unique audience groups, a game like Destiny 2 must cater to many masters. That challenge is keenly felt with Destiny 2's latest expansion. Lightfall is the penultimate chapter in the storytelling arc that has been underway since the original game's launch in 2014. It misses the mark as a narrative and in a few other key ways. But as a gradual evolution of what has come before, it brings a lot of important additions to the table.

Lightfall's meandering and poorly explained plot does not offer a solid first impression. Attempts to nod tonally to '80s action flicks mostly fall flat, trying and failing to muster a playful vibe at odds with the impending apocalypse. A new core character and vendor, whose dialogue is even more irritating than the combined lot of early Destiny 2 leads, dramatically exacerbates that tonal misstep. After several missions that tease big revelations, the story closes with little payoff, putting players right back where it started in the opening cinematic.

The city of Neomuna on Neptune is colorful, but vacant and void of life. It lacks the sense of discovery and exploration that characterizes the best destinations in the game. However, the distant planet houses some enjoyable combat locales and activities, including invigorating public combat spaces, new enemy configurations, and the most dangerous non-boss enemies the game has yet introduced, in the form of the Tormentors – a great challenge, whenever they show up.

The poor taste left behind by Lightfall's struggling campaign is gradually alleviated by much of what the rest of the expansion offers. The new Strand subclasses take a while to wrap one's head around but eventually emerge as incredibly rewarding and powerful. Strand abilities lead to a more mobile and controllable battlefield, dramatically expanding the available playstyles in the best of ways.

Major quality-of-life improvements also make a big difference, even if some systems still need tweaking. The long-awaited approach to loadouts is excellent, letting you set up numerous builds to flip between on the fly – both for function and cosmetics. A new approach to mods is easier to grasp for newcomers to build-crafting. Alongside adjustments to how artifact unlocks provide new abilities, and continual additions to each subclass' options, the capability to tweak and experiment is much more enjoyable than it has been previously.

New commendation and guardian rank systems are good additions, but both feel too prescriptive and limited to be meaningful. Guardian ranks demand too specific tasks that don't represent what they purport to do – express a given player's experience and expertise. And commendations are a fun idea supporting improved community expression, but in practice, players are mostly just spamming them out without consideration.

Other endgame and investment-oriented activities fare much better than the campaign. Stellar extra missions offer new challenges and locales, like the thrilling hidden quest for the Vexcalibur exotic. On that note, several new exotics add much to the sandbox experience, making me eager to chase them down. The latest raid offers an intriguing core mechanic and a unique visual palette that blends organic and tech-infused looks into a cohesive style. And the new seasonal content, focused on Earth's final defense against invasion and destruction, is engaging and fun.

I may have found the campaign uninspired and its legendary difficulty a slog characterized by bullet-spongey foes. But an expansion to a game this big is more than just its opening story. Lightfall sets up some strong possibilities – narratively and in the gameplay sphere – for a rewarding year of adventure ahead. Despite some frustrations, Destiny 2 continues to make strides in catering to a diverse player base characterized by disparate desires. Lightfall is hit and miss, but any stumbles shouldn't be enough to derail players' enthusiasm for continued adventure or the excitement of seeing the epic conclude over the next year. **BY MATT MILLER**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE Online Multiplayer Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bungie **DEVELOPER** Bungie
RELEASE February 28 **RATING** T

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

Razor sharp

Team Ninja has earned a reputation for crafting some of the most satisfying action games around, nimbly transitioning from the high-octane action Ninja Gaiden series to the Soulslike thrills of Nioh. Its latest effort, Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty, is an unforgiving but deeply rewarding showcase of freneticism that lives up to this lineage. The smooth swordplay, brilliant boss fights, and novel systems further prove Team Ninja's ability to craft unrelenting experiences. Although its back half is hampered by a lack of enemy variety, its lightning-fast duels make it one of the more gratifying titles in recent memory.

Set in a version of 2nd-century China inspired by the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, we follow an unnamed militia soldier as they're drawn into a war over an immortality-granting elixir. While fans of the book will likely enjoy fighting alongside their favorite figures, this narrative does little to communicate their nuances or depth, with storytelling that serves as little more than set dressing.

While the writing is unremarkable, battles are entrancing. Those familiar with Soulslikes will feel at home with Wo Long's similar progression systems, online features, and shared brutal difficulty. More specifically, the core combat is directly influenced by Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, emphasizing parrying attacks so you can eventually break your foe's poise and land a Fatal Strike.

While plenty of titles have attempted to mimic these elements to varying results, Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty evokes the same joy and despair found in the games that inspired it, its duels capturing a white-knuckled intensity elevated by precise controls and well-telegraphed enemy attacks. Here, deflecting blows lets you build up Spirit, which can be used to shore up your defenses, perform powerful moves, or cast satisfying element-themed spells.

Deflecting is essential for gaining momentum, and once you get used to it, it feels responsive and thoroughly rewarding to pull off. Everything can be parried; sword swings, swipes from hulking monsters, and even lightning bolts, each accompanied by a musical twang of steel that sends tingles. Exchanges can be deliberate as you probe for weaknesses and tactically use your Spirit, or over in the blink of an eye as you parry an unblockable Critical Blow, shatter an enemy's poise, and demolishing them in a single exhilarating instant. When combined with imposing boss fights, a flexible progression that lets you freely respec your character, and deviously designed levels that invite exploration, at its best, this is one of the finest action entries in some time.

Unfortunately, there are a couple of noticeable drawbacks. Most glaringly, it strains against its long runtime in its last half, resulting in some tedium and stretches that aren't challenging enough. There are too few unique enemies for an experience based around memorizing patterns, making it feel like a rhythm game that repeats the same songs too often. Other annoyances include a distracting loot system and noticeable technical issues, like pop-ins and framerate drops in larger areas.

But even as its second half failed to match what came earlier, Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty is a finely honed delight. Its action is precise and responsive, and learning the intricacies of each adversary is exceedingly fulfilling. While I wish its back stretch was either pared down or had a wider variety of foes, this is a rare title that induces trance-like focus and euphoric moments of victory. It may not quite reach the heights of the works that inspired it, but it's not far off. **BY ELIJAH GONZALEZ**

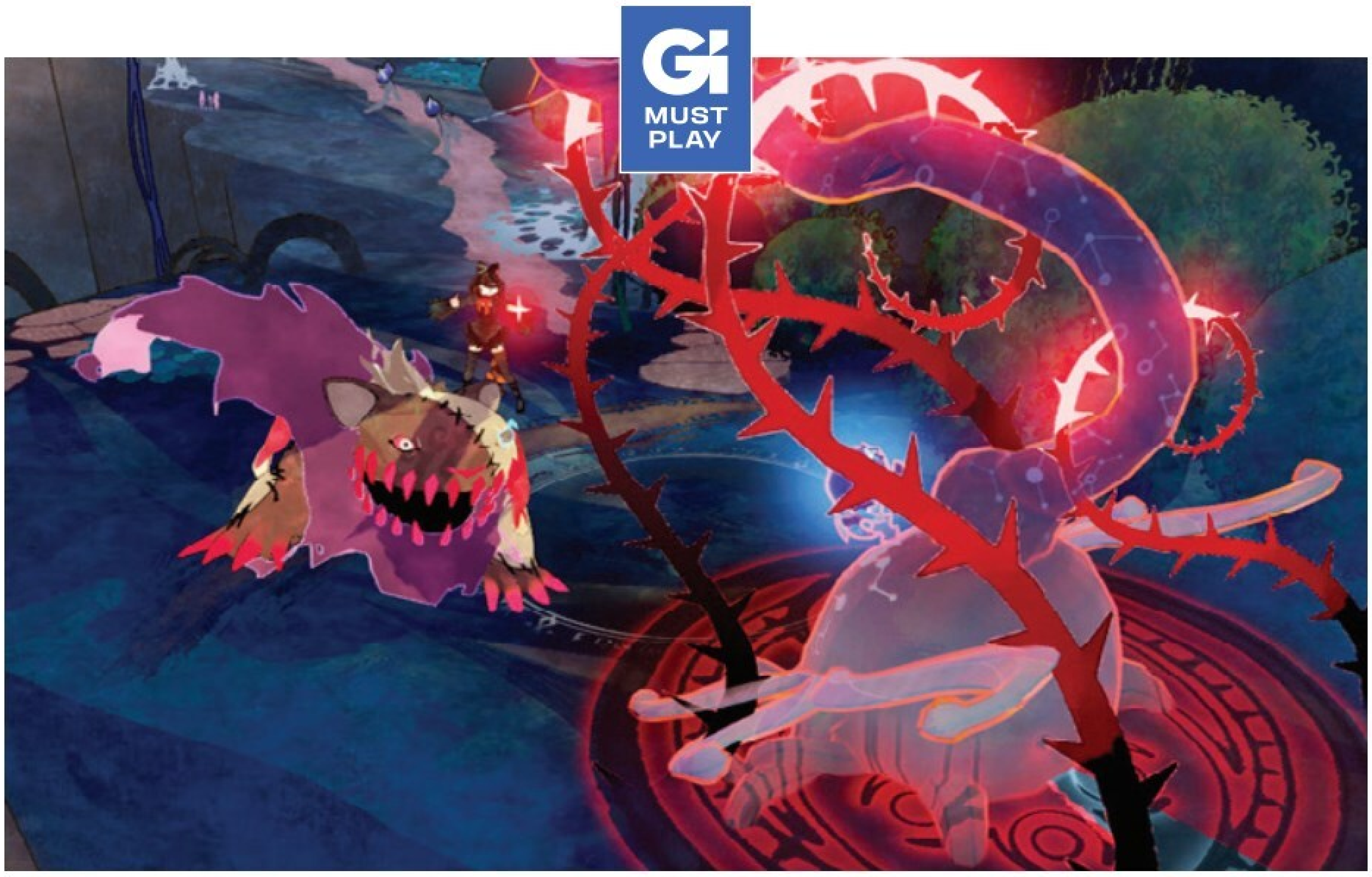
8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (3-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER Team Ninja **RELEASE** March 3 **RATING** M

BAYONETTA ORIGINS: CEREZA AND THE LOST DEMON

A worthy apprentice

GI MUST PLAY



Few games in recent memory made me smile the way Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon has. This prequel to the Bayonetta series rewrites its mature-rated stylish combat within the whimsical pages of a storybook, spinning an endearing yarn of a young witch fighting to prove herself while forming an unlikely friendship. The result is an eye-catching, unexpectedly dense adventure that has more charm than it knows what to do with.

This top-down action-adventure game is a substantial romp that follows a 10-year-old Cereza, still training to become a full-fledged Umbra Witch. To gain enough strength to free her captive mother, she ventures into a forbidden fairie forest in pursuit of power, joined by her reluctant demon partner, Cheshire. Bayonetta Origins' story is my favorite of the entire franchise. It's heartwarming, humorous, and coherent, and has the emotional depth to provide substance to its visual eye candy. The plot takes unexpected yet well-earned turns, and the performances – Cereza's in particular – are wonderful. I especially loved the narrator; her warm delivery and smile-inducing impression of the gruff Cheshire rekindled the long-forgotten joy of being read a fun bedtime story.

Simultaneously steering both characters – Cereza with the left stick and Cheshire with the right – is unwieldy at first, but it soon becomes second nature. The well-designed platforming and puzzle obstacles challenged my thinking, reflexes, and dexterity without ever becoming too complicated or tedious. Origins' fun battle system makes the most of its relative simplicity. Cheshire executes single-button combos, while Cereza binds enemies in place using magic vines. Navigating two characters on a busy battlefield made me cross-eyed sometimes, but I like the unique strategy of dodging foes to tie them down before tearing them to shreds.

Unlocking each character's skill trees adds small but meaningful layers that deepen combat by adding executions, counters, evades, and longer combo strings that rely on button timing rather than combining inputs. Cheshire's elemental transformations, such as using a grass form's vine to yank down airborne targets and a water form that fires powerful streams, are a blast, especially in the larger arena bouts. A sprinkling of grandiose boss battles, including a titanic final battle, evoke the chaos of the main series in a good way without becoming as sweat-inducing. I'm fine with that, as the difficulty has enough spice without compromising Origins' more relaxed vibe.

Simply looking at Bayonetta Origins is a colorful treat, thanks to its painterly art direction that evokes games like Ōkami. A melodic soundtrack filled with lovely tunes, cute sound effects, and Zelda-esque piano jingles makes this world feel even more magical. I enjoyed revisiting parts of the sprawling map to unlock new areas and solving simple yet satisfying puzzles using Cheshire's abilities. Unfortunately, getting lost can be easy, but the game compensates by clearly marking collectibles and even guiding lights to save points. Even smaller interactions, like playing a rhythm mini-game to grow flowers, shattering crystal dandelions for currency, or shaking bushes for potion ingredients, feed into a playful atmosphere that almost makes the forest feel toylike.

Much like Cereza herself, Bayonetta Origins doesn't look like much on the surface, but I smiled more and more as its potential bubbled up to the surface. This is an exceptional and refreshing change of pace for the franchise, and you don't even need to be a fan of the series or the action genre to enjoy it. Don't underestimate what this pint-sized spellcaster and her demonic partner have to offer.

BY MARCUS STEWART

8.75

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Adventure
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Platinum Games
RELEASE March 17 **RATING** T

WWE 2K23

Tightening some holds

WWE 2K23 doesn't break the mold from last year's big re-debut, instead offering more minor improvements and additions to the elements that worked. The action feels similar but a little more polished, and the modes are more fleshed out. There are still some kinks to work out, but 2K23 stands as a respectable follow-up.

Control-wise, 2K23 is identical to the previous game's revamped setup but is a bit smoother. Legacy issues remain, however, such as how finicky picking up weapons feels. I've also become increasingly frustrated having to hit multiple reversal buttons due to the often-annoying guessing game of deducing which input your opponent may hit. WarGames stands as the big new match type, faithfully replicating the fun and chaos of the real-life version.

Beyond that, the usual offerings return as you remember them, though a deeper tutorial does a better job onboarding or refreshing players to the combat's various nuances. The roster is impressively deep, looks great, and is mostly up-to-date. I also didn't encounter significant technical glitches – always a good sign for this series. Overall, the gameplay hasn't changed significantly, so if you enjoyed 2K22, you'll slip right into 2K23. If you didn't, it's unlikely this entry will change your mind.

The documentary-style Showcase mode has a fun twist, letting you relive cover star John Cena's career as told through his biggest losses. This mode is a meatier offering than last year's Rey Mysterio Showcase, as you'll beat Cena using a wide assortment of his greatest rivals, from Edge to The Rock to Brock Lesnar. The general framework remains unchanged; you can complete objectives such as performing certain moves to unlock extra goodies like era-specific versions of wrestlers. This loop can feel like work, but the rewards are generally worth the effort, and a delightfully goofy finale almost makes it worth completing just to see.

I had a better time with the improved MyRise this year, which offers two separate story campaigns. As either a newly signed indie darling or a second-generation prospect, both routes offer enjoyable choice-driven narratives ranging from silly to cringy with humorous inside jokes for smartened-up fans. MyGM remains a fun time sink that offers new GMs, match types, modifiers, and other options to help build your chosen brand.

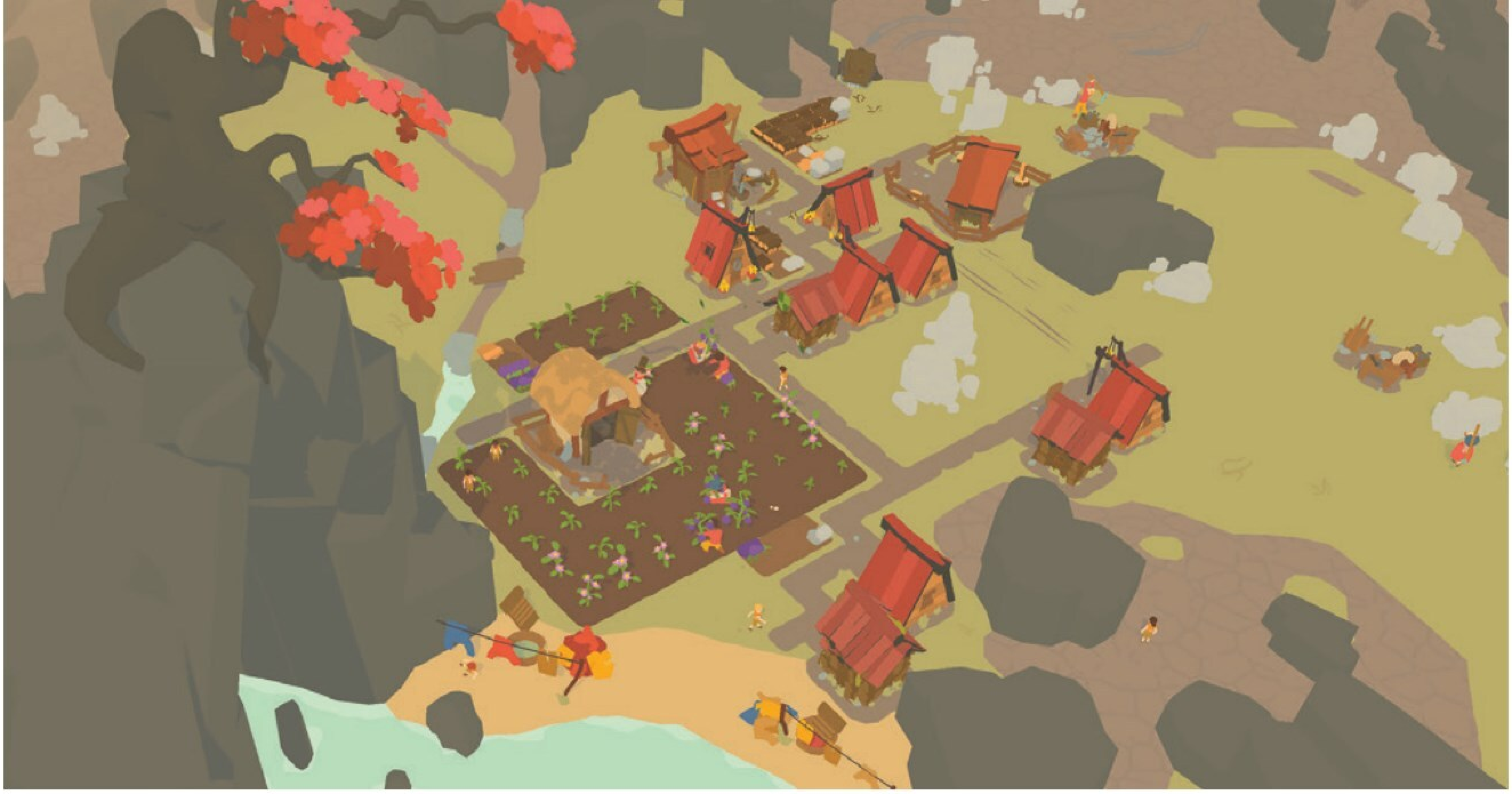
The toybox-like Universe Mode now offers expanded narrative control for steering a superstar's career, but it's not enough to retain my interest for very long. MyFaction, in which you collect, build, and customize superstar teams via a trading card game format, is pretty much the same but does include competitive online play. As with everything else, smaller tweaks bolster their respective modes in ways that should please their existing fans but may not be enough to attract new ones.

As of writing, the online play is, unfortunately, a bit of a disaster. During the game's early launch, I never played a match where my opponent wasn't disconnected and replaced by an A.I.. While that's a smooth fix to keep players in the game, the inability to play without interruption is disappointing and will hopefully be patched up soon.

WWE 2K23's incremental bells and whistles means it's technically an overall stronger package than 2K22. However, unlike last year, it doesn't benefit from the rose-colored excitement of getting to play a big wrestling sim again after a years-long absence. The similarities to its predecessor mean that 2K23 feels more formulaic than special, but it continues the series' overall positive trajectory. Like watching a returning legend play their greatest hits night after night, the novelty has faded, but I'm still pleased to have them back – for now. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 6-Player Action (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Visual Concepts **RELEASE** March 17 **RATING** T



OUTLANDERS

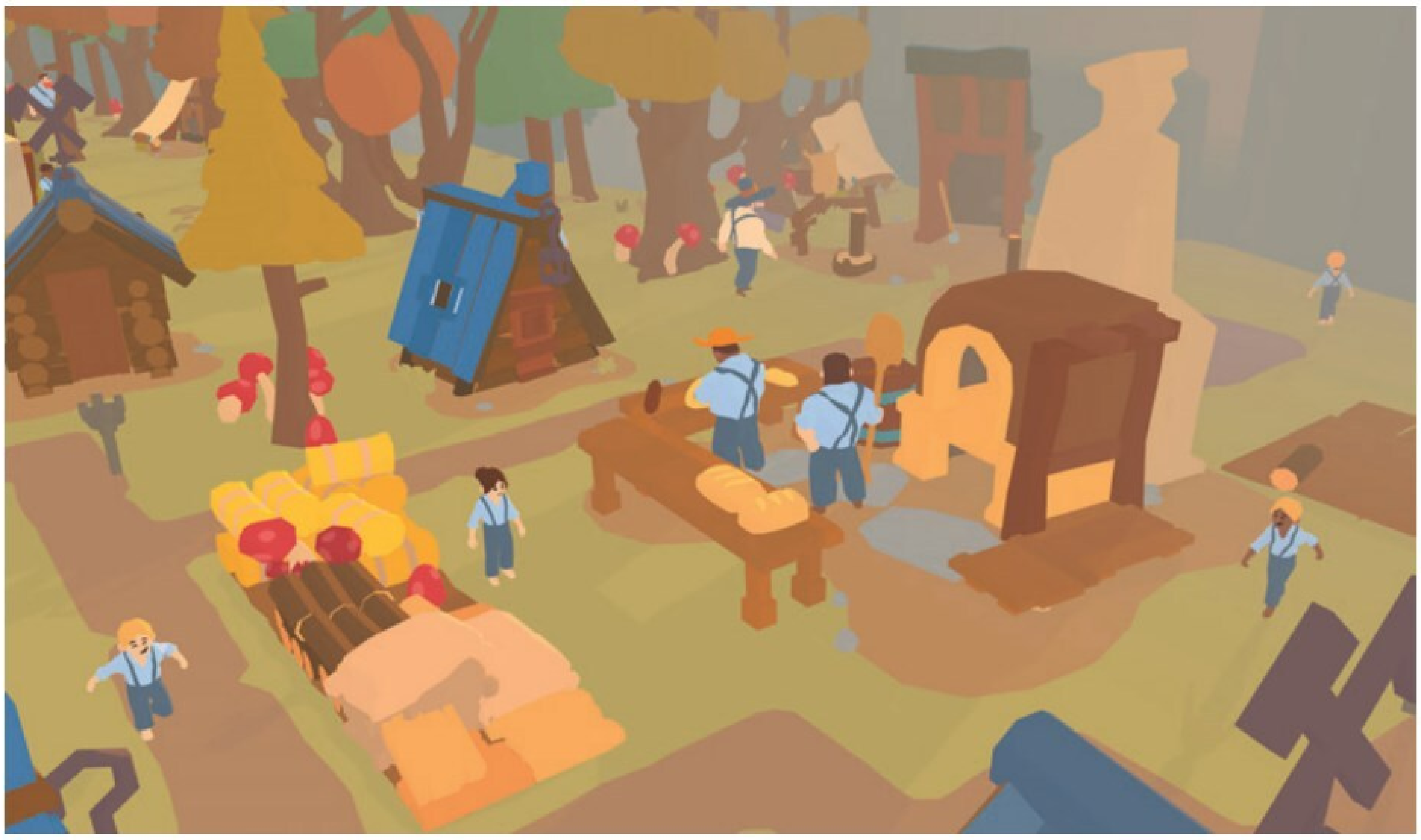
No need to settle

In this small-scale management simulation, you step into the role of the leader of an imperiled settlement across dozens of scenarios. Some task you with fixing a destroyed boat so you can escape the island, while others challenge you to learn the game's farming mechanics or construct a giant statue made of bread. Don't be fooled by the simple visual style; these scenarios grow in complexity as you unlock more structures and jobs, like a farm to grow crops, bakeries to generate bread, and breweries to give your followers the gift of beer.

Each time a new structure was introduced, I struggled to keep up with adding more to the equation, but eventually, they just became another part of my growing toolbox, providing for a better simulation experience in both the game's stringent scenario-based campaigns and the customizable sandbox mode.

Outlanders is rather hands-on with its simulation mechanics. Your followers act autonomously, but you, as the town leader, assign them job roles and priorities. Because of this, I was constantly moving followers around to adapt to the community's needs. You need to not only coexist with nature but also learn how to avoid depleting its resources before you have the means to replenish them. Failing at this seemingly simple task results in the death of your civilization nearly every time.

Though the unforgiving moments where I watched my followers drop like flies wore on me at times, I loved how each scenario challenged me to balance all these factors to accomplish a set of goals. Outlanders can be challenging and frustrating, but I rarely felt overwhelmed. It doesn't deliver on the grand scale of the large city simulations many associate with the genre, but its small-scale approach appeals to the task-oriented part of your brain, creating an immensely satisfying experience that brought me back time and time again. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

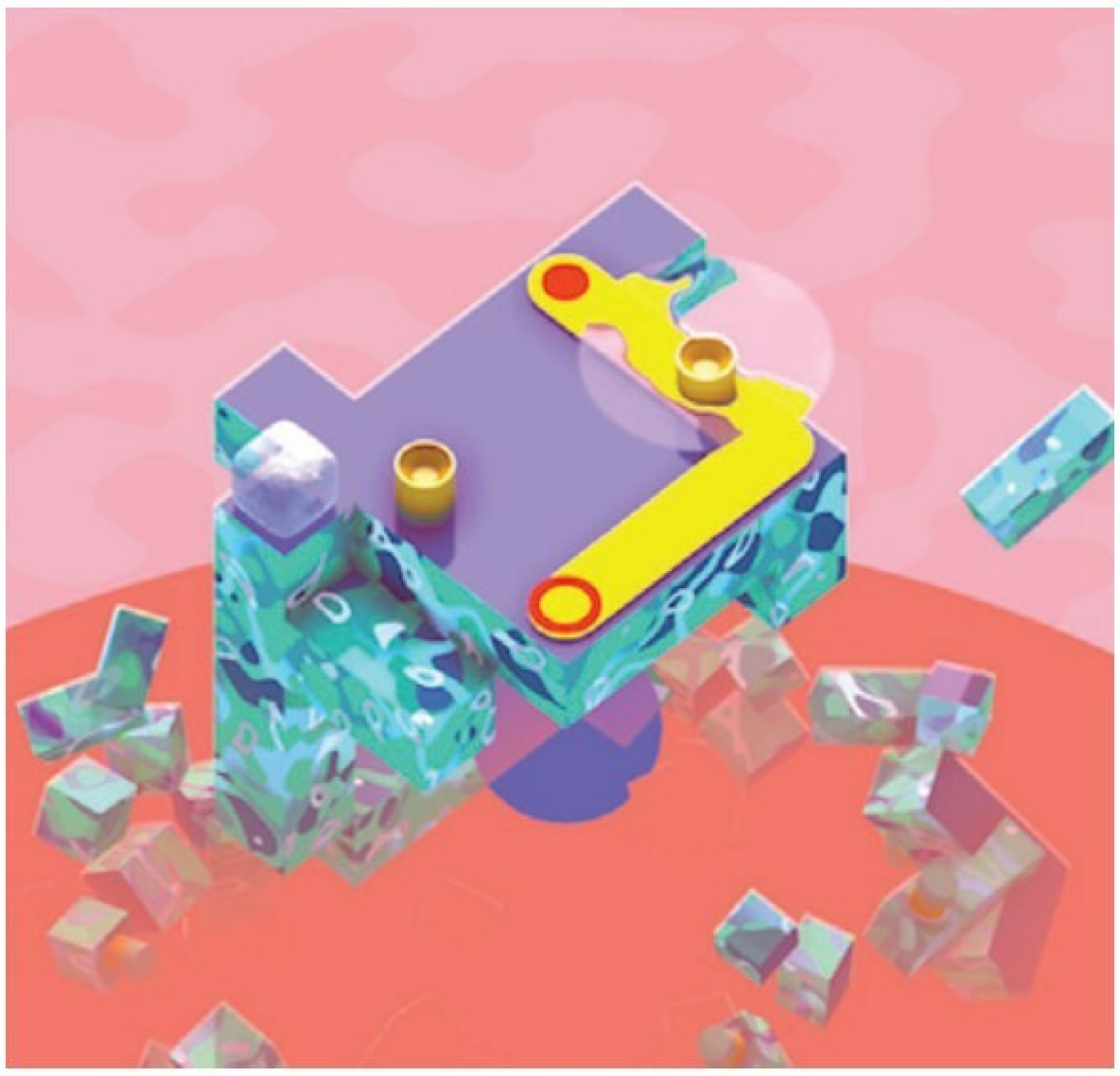


8.25

PLATFORM PC • iOS **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Pomelo Games
DEVELOPER Pomelo Games
RELEASE September 17, 2019 (iOS), March 7, 2023 (PC) **RATING** 12+ (iOS), NR (PC)

RYTMOS

Music to my ears



Anyone who makes or writes music knows the path to a complete track isn't linear. It's a process where instruments weave in and out of the composition on the whim of the person making it. And even when the vision is clear, and you know exactly where you want to take the song, things can get in the way. Rytmos, developer Floppy Club's first non-mobile game, nails that feeling. It uses puzzles to extract the joy, escalation, triumphs, and trials of making music, and it does so with great success.

Puzzles begin easy but continue to grow in challenge at an engaging pace. Floppy Club throws in different obstacles to tease the brain, like ice cubes that continue to move until they hit a wall, warp portals, origami-like rocks that move with your disc, and more. What I like most about these puzzles is that, much like the rest of the game, they're more about the feeling of building something than they are obstacles in the way of an end goal.

Rytmos is short and sweet, and its minimalist visuals and zen-like beats left me feeling warm. Its puzzles match everything else the game is doing, and it all works together well to highlight the music, its inspirations' place in history, and the instruments that create it. The audiophile pedigree of Floppy Club shines through in Rytmos, and it feels explicitly designed with musicians and music enthusiasts in mind. But puzzle fiends will also find a chill afternoon of challenges to play through here.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

8.5

PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Puzzle/Rhythm/Music **PUBLISHER** Floppy Club
DEVELOPER Floppy Club **RELEASE** February 28 **RATING** E

CRIME BOSS: ROCKAY CITY

The city that sleeps

On paper, Crime Boss: Rockay City is a bombastic, star-studded, city-spanning adventure about a criminal organization's rise to the top. The actual game, however, is anything but. The gameplay is unbalanced, buggy, repetitive, and boring. The celebrity-filled cast is exciting at first glance, but crude and humorless writing weighs down the already-phoned-in performances by Michael Madsen, Michael Rooker, Vanilla Ice, and more. The single-player roguelite campaign lacks any of the genre's typical hooks, and bugs can prevent progress at critical points in a run. Multiplayer works, but the two cooperative modes offer the same mindlessly dull rotation of missions you'll play dozens of times throughout the campaign. All of this combines to create an aimless package not worth playing with experiences executed significantly better in other games.

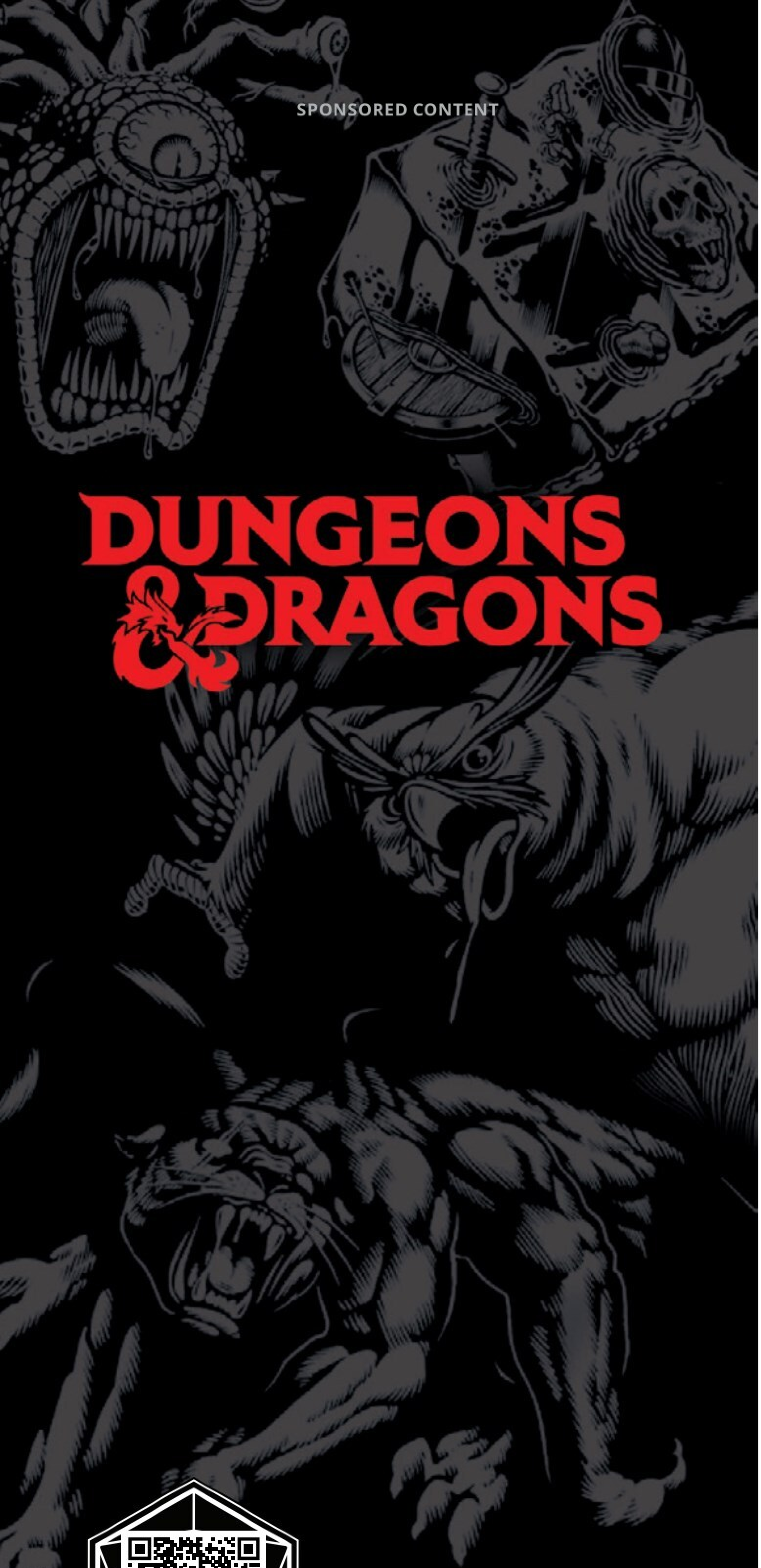
Strange interstitial missions attempt to break up this monotony, like one where I lived through one of my gang member's Vietnam War nightmares, but they flounder just as much as the main missions. The game attempts to shake things up in a few other ways, but every time it veers from the path is a reminder that the core of Crime Boss – its systems, gameplay, and characters – don't work. And as a result, everything else buckles.

Crime Boss: Rockay City is proof that star power isn't everything. In fact, it's a reminder that a celebrity cast does nothing for a game when it's void of anything interesting to support it. When run-ending bugs appear, Crime Boss is miserable, but even when I play a mission bug-free, I witness a painfully dull take on organized crime. At its best, Crime Boss functions, but it never captures my attention meaningfully. Instead, it pushes me further away, leaving me with no desire to ever return to Rockay City. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC** ■

3

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA) **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 505 Games **DEVELOPER** Ingame Studios
RELEASE March 28 (Consoles TBA) **RATING** M

SPONSORED CONTENT



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WIZARDS OF THE COAST

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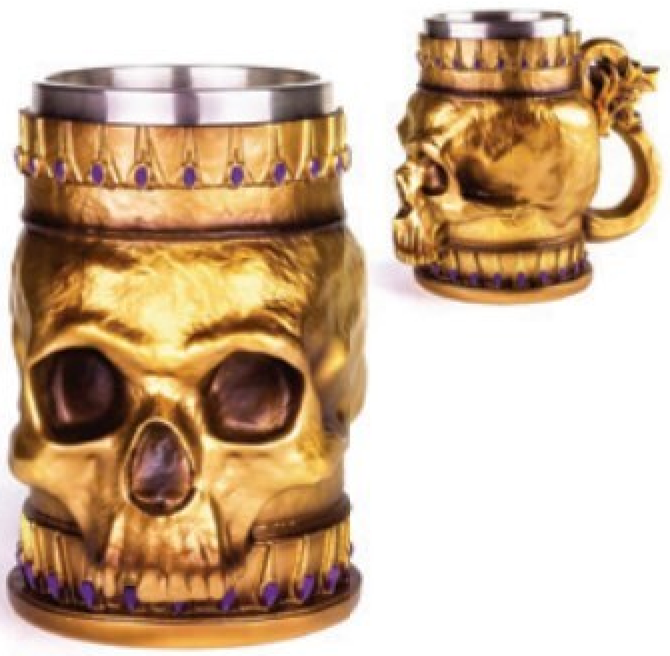
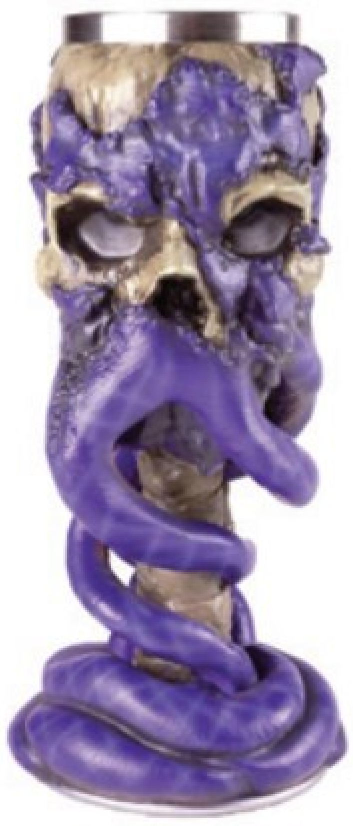
Dungeons & Dragons Skull Tankard – GameStop Exclusive
SKU 198787



The Skull Tankard was similar to tankards found in any tavern, but it had one key distinguishing feature. On one side of the tankard, there was a face with a stern expression carved into it.

- Holds 16 fluid oz.
- Item is hand-wash only
- Removable stainless-steel insert for easier cleaning

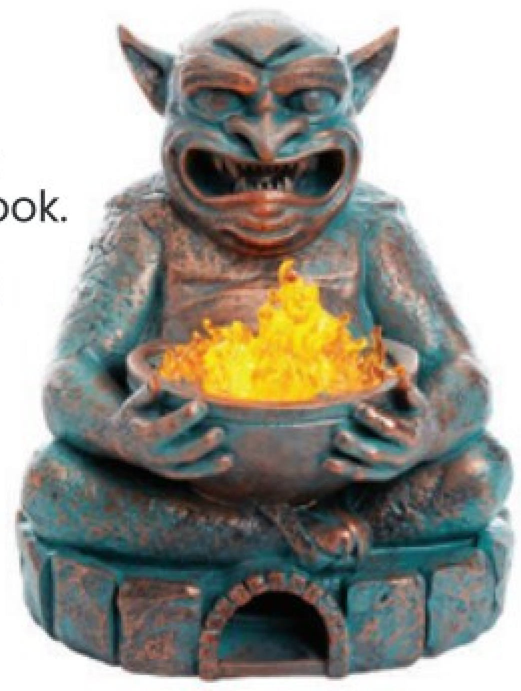


Dungeons & Dragons Mind Flayer Goblet – GameStop Exclusive
SKU 198786

The Mind Flayers were psionic tyrants, slavers, and interdimensional voyagers – insidious masterminds that harvest entire races for their own twisted ends.

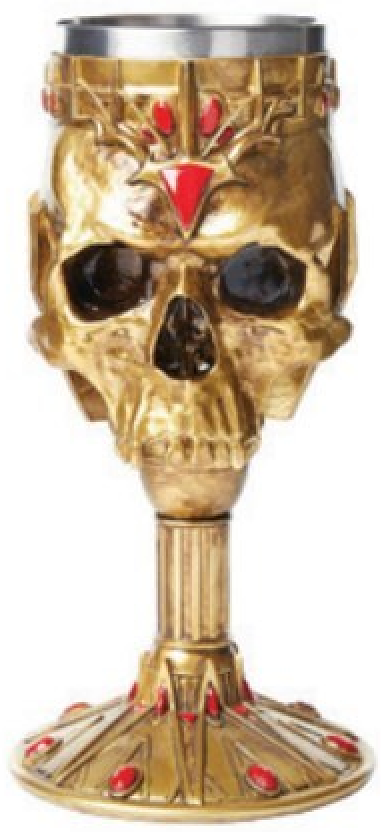
- Holds 6.8 fluid oz.
- Item is hand-wash only
- Removable stainless-steel insert for easier cleaning

Dungeons & Dragons Dice Tower in Faux Bronze – GameStop Exclusive
SKU 326035



Inspired and based on the cover art designed by David A. Trampier from the original first edition D&D Player's Handbook.

With a removable head topper, you can insert any standard regulation-sized D&D dice to engage gameplay.
The unique paint applications and three-dimensional design mimic the cover art, and the light-up fire will definitely add a unique flair to any D&D gamer.



Dungeons & Dragons Skull Chalice Goblet – GameStop Exclusive
SKU 327756

The Skull Chalice in Dungeons & Dragons was a legendary but non-magical artifact used as a symbol of office for rulers, and now you can have your very own! Get this Skull Chalice exclusively at GameStop and rule over the rest of your drinkware!

- Holds 15.4 fluid oz.
- Item is hand-wash only
- Removable stainless-steel insert for easier cleaning

oculus

THE MEANING OF META, VR, AND THE METAVERSE

The uncertain bets of a corporate behemoth

BY STEVEN L. KENT

The interview heats up when Jason Rubin, Meta vice president of metaverse content, hears an all too familiar question. Like a prizefighter who's taken one on the chin, he steps up his defense and returns fire.

The offending question was whether virtual reality would be the next big thing or the latest 3DTV.

Rubin, who's been handling the press for 30 years, responds, "I've been hearing that 3DTV thing since I started with Oculus [now Meta Reality Labs] eight years ago.

"The problem with 3DTV was A: it didn't work for most people, and B: it didn't offer anything new, just the same movies in 3D.

"Virtual Reality A: is not s----y because it adjusts to your eyes, and B: provides an entirely new world with an entirely new set of rules."

Unfair comparisons aside, Rubin and Meta have a lot on their plate with a downturn in VR sales, powerful competitors entering the field, and the public's general misperception of Reality Labs' mission.

PRESENT CONDITIONS

Company policy prevents Rubin from divulging specific numbers. However, he describes the Meta Quest 2 install base as “Not yet like the consoles, but pretty decent.”

“We believe Quest 2 has shipped somewhere in the region of 15 to 20 million units since launch,” says Leo Gebbie, principal analyst of connected devices at London-based CCS Insight.

If Gebbie’s numbers are accurate, Meta has passed an important tipping point – the 10 million unit marker, long seen as the point when platforms become self-sustaining.

“I’m a big believer in the number 10 million,” says Dr. Jason Schell, a professor at Carnegie Mellon and the founder of Schell Games, the developer of the I Expect You to Die games and one of Meta’s most prolific and successful publishing partners. “When there is less than 10 million of something, probably none of your friends have it. When there are over 10 million, probably at least one of your friends has it – whether it be smartphones or social media accounts or VR headsets.”

Unfortunately, at a time when manufacturers typically lower their hardware prices to ramp up their sales, Meta went in the opposite direction.

“Meta’s Reality Labs division saw revenue fall in the fourth quarter of [2022] to $727 million, a 17% fall over the year,” says Gebbie. “This was mostly attributed to poor sales of the Quest 2, which seems to have been struggling since it saw its base price rise from $299 to $399.”

With Sony having just released its PlayStation VR2 headset in February and Apple VR looming on the unannounced horizon, Meta hiked Quest 2 prices last August due to rising manufacturing costs. The timing couldn’t have been worse. Trying to put a good face on the situation, Rubin says, “Assuming the price increase works out, we have an infinite amount of content to deliver.”

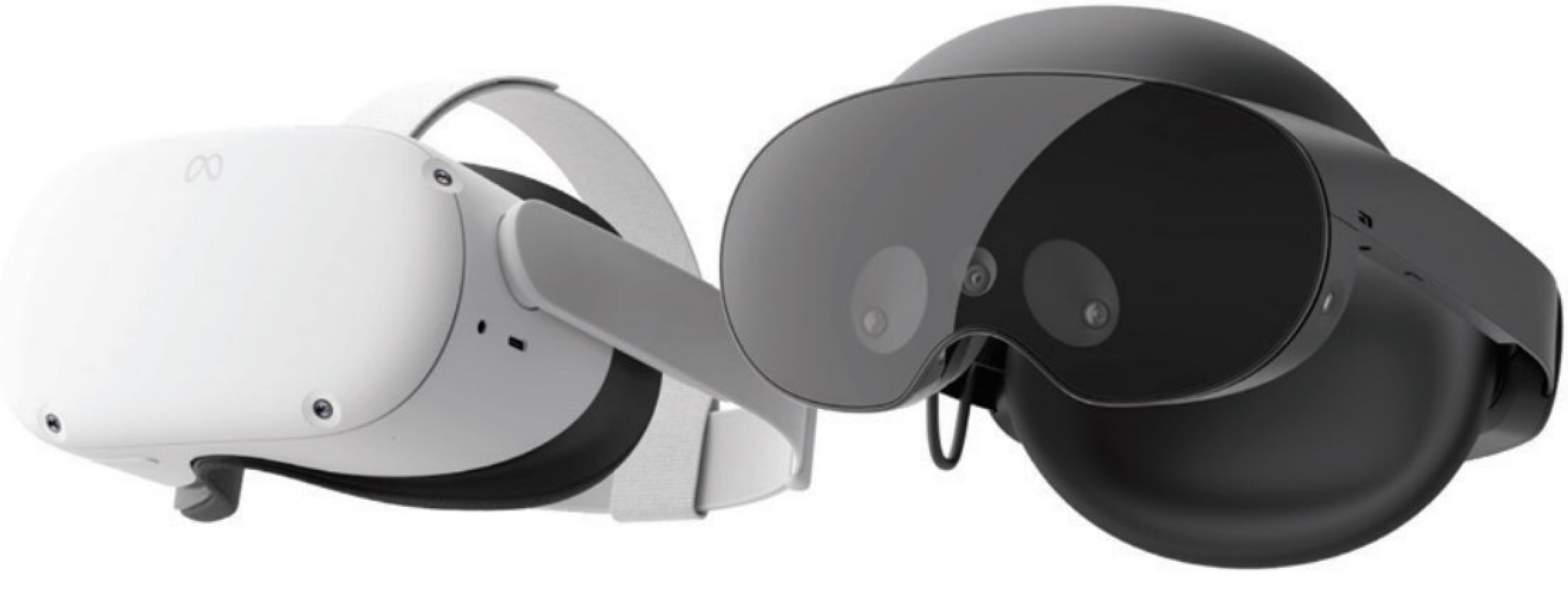
LESS THAN INFINITE, BUT...

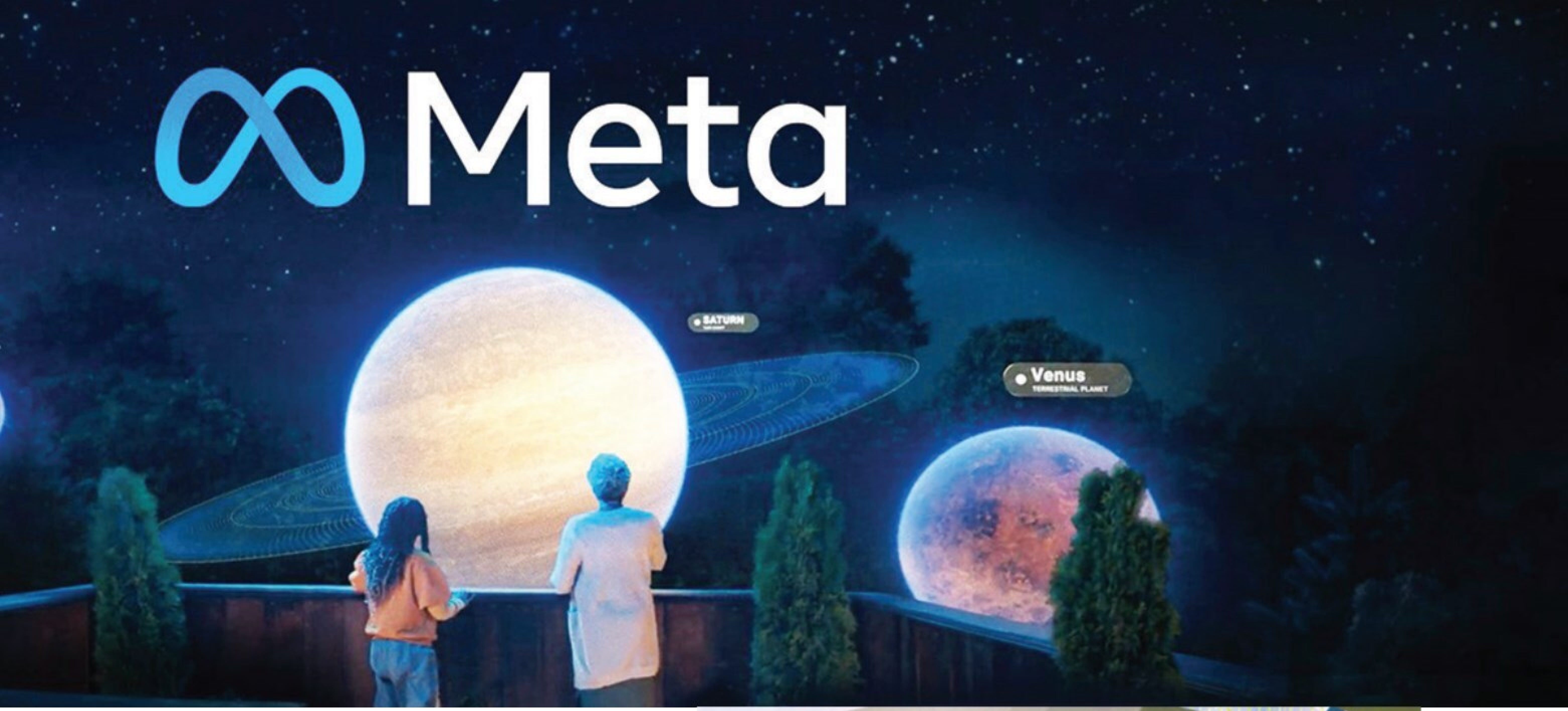
Meta’s content might not be infinite, but it’s big enough to warrant three virtual outlets. Meta has a virtual storefront, the Quest Store, with over 400 officially approved games and apps. It also has App Lab.

“App Lab is where developers test their ideas,” says Melissa Brown, Meta’s head of developer relations. After describing the App Lab environment as something of a “wild west,” she adds, “The store is very curated and with good reason. If somebody has a bad experience in VR, they’re unlikely to put that headset back on, and we want this platform to grow.”

Brown recites some Quest Store accomplishments: over $1 billion in sales last year, nearly a third of the games have over $1 million in sales, and 33 titles made over $10 million.

She’s always hunting for more content. When the conversation strays to a game called





Mortuary Assistant in which a fledgling mortician must embalm and prepare bodies while trying to determine which of her post-mortem patients is demonically possessed, Ms. Brown asks if it would lend itself to VR.

Along with the Quest Store and App Lab, Quest 2 owners can connect to their PCs and access VR games on Steam. The Meta world is growing.

But it's growing too quickly, according to the Federal Trade Commission, the agency that scrutinizes high-profile acquisitions (such as Microsoft purchasing Activision) to prevent monopolies. When Meta announced plans to acquire Within Unlimited, the creator of a popular fitness app called Supernatural, the FTC unsuccessfully tried to block the transaction.

"Facebook [a.k.a. Meta] is good at deciding that there's going to be a market and creating it," says Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter. "Now they're getting crap from the government. [The FTC says] 'Oh you can't buy this crappy little VR studio.'

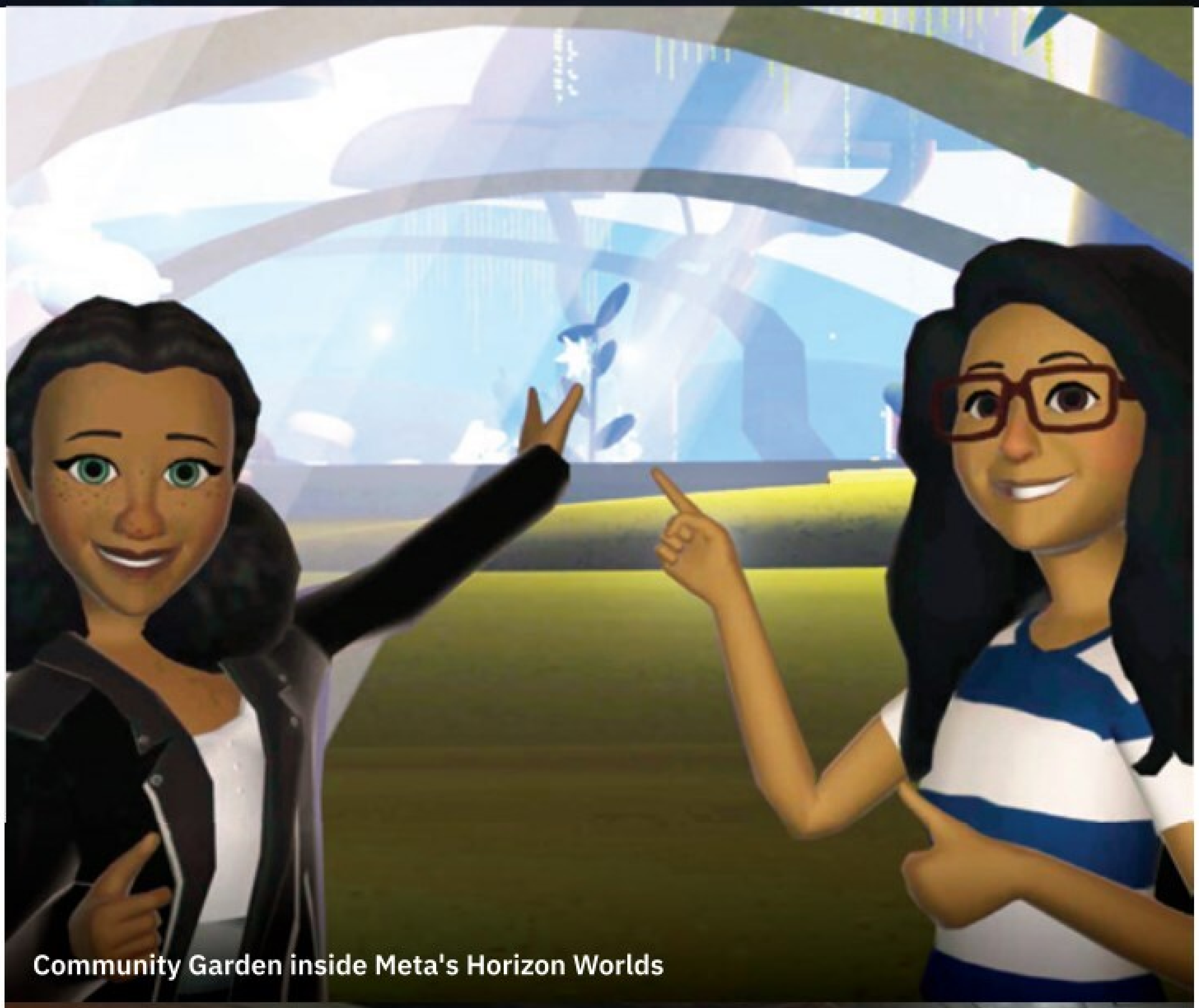
"'Why?'

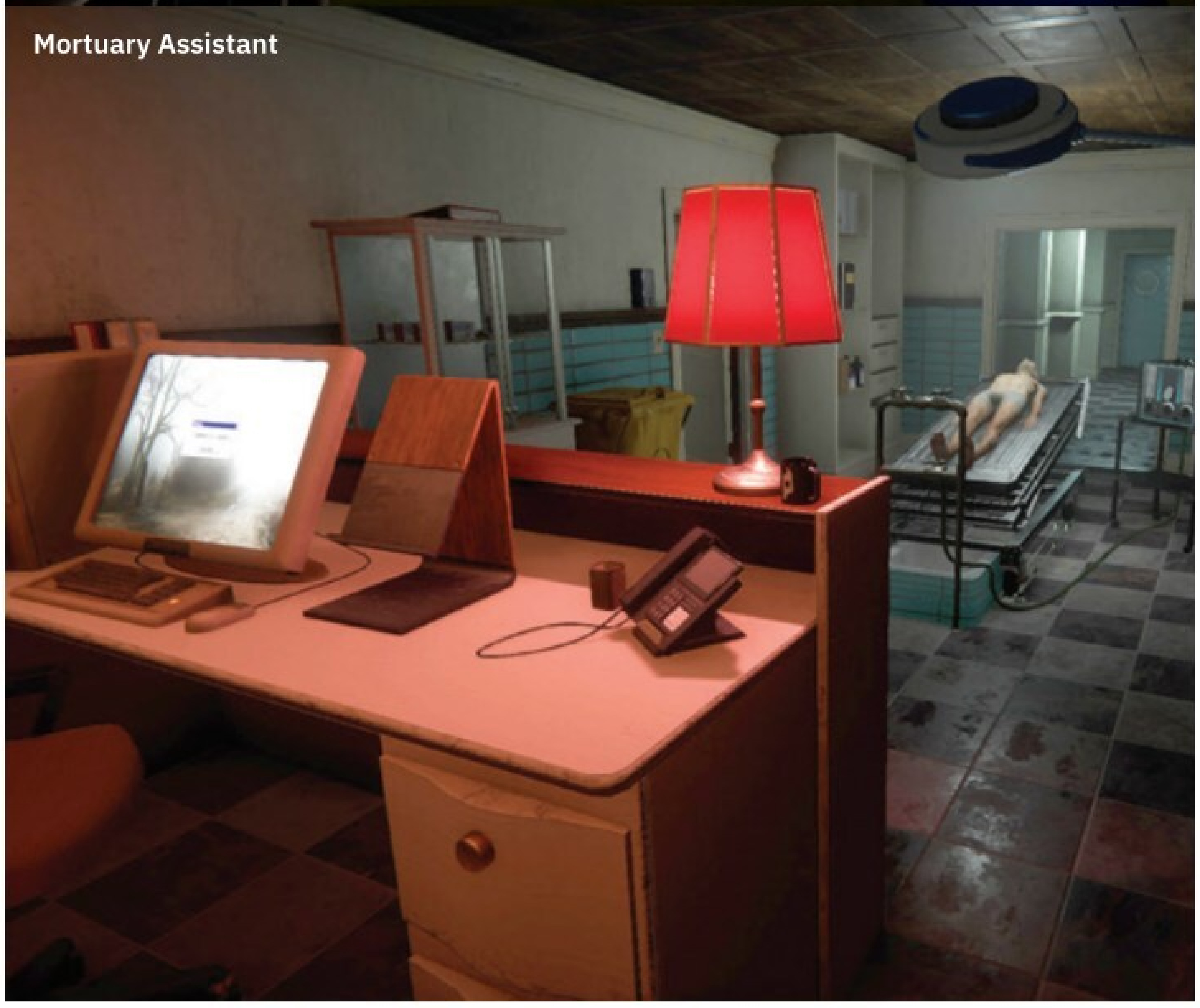
"'Because you'll be too big.'

"Too big for what? VR's not there yet. Meta is as good as anybody, better than anybody, and even it's not that good. VR is a hard business to build."

Hard to build or not, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg is betting billions on virtual reality and the metaverse.

In a recent episode of the *All-In* podcast, venture capitalist and Golden State Warriors co-owner Chamoth Palihapitiya estimated Zuckerberg would invest as much as $250 billion into Reality Labs over the next ten years. Though Meta executives and outside analysts question Palihapitiya's numbers, everybody agrees that Zuckerberg's spending big.


Community Garden inside Meta's Horizon Worlds


Mortuary Assistant

Half-Life: Alyx

LURING CUSTOMERS

Any new platform, be it computers, consoles, or cell phones, faces a Catch-22. You need killer apps to attract users, but developers don't publish killer apps on under-populated platforms.

"It's that chicken and egg thing," says Pachter. "There are a lot of small games like Creed that are good but not necessarily immersive. You're not going to play Creed for 1,200 hours, and there's no Grand Theft Auto on VR."

Virtual Reality may not have a Grand Theft Auto, but the games keep getting bigger and better. In 2018, Beat Games gave VR its most inviting game with Beat Saber. Two years later, Valve produced an acknowledged masterpiece called Half-Life: Alyx. More recently, Capcom released a highly-regarded Quest 2 version of Resident Evil 4, developed by Armature Studio.

"[Resident Evil 4 is] one of my favorite VR games," says Rubin. "It's like they made that game thinking sometime in the future there's going to be a VR version."

Resident Evil 4 translated beautifully to Quest 2, but asked if Capcom approached Meta about porting the game, Rubin acknowledges it was the other way around and adds, "We had Armature build it." Like Within Unlimited, Austin-based Armature is part of the growing stable of Meta-owned game studios.

Camouflaj, another Meta acquisition, released Iron Man VR on Quest 2 in November 2022. Originally released for PlayStation VR, it became a Quest Store bestseller.

"Traditional game developers have a thick rule book and 50 years of learning to apply. With VR development, that rule book is much thinner because the focus on VR development only took off over the last 10 years, maybe less," says Camouflaj founder Ryan Payton, who began his career working under Hideo Kojima as an assistant producer on the Metal Gear Solid series.

"One of the fun things about working in VR is that we're constantly trying to solve problems that nobody has ever faced before. That makes VR development extra challenging."

THE FUTURE IS MIXED

Jason Rubin isn't the only person who bristles at the 3DTV comparison. Dr. Schell quickly dispatches it once and for all.

"Virtual Boy is a great illustration of virtual reality [being] misunderstood. It offered 3D, but 3D is not something people care about. That's why 3DTV has flopped. We've had 3D for 150 years with ViewMasters and stereoscopes."

Both a college professor and a gaming exec, Schell comfortably discusses practical and theoretical considerations. Despite Quest 2's young install base, Schell Games has developed multiple titles that have sold over one million copies, including Among Us VR and I Expect You To Die.

"I firmly believe that VR is here to stay and that headsets are going to be a persistent part of gaming infrastructure for the next several decades," says Schell. "The next thing that's coming is mixed reality. MR feels like it's going to be a central trend in the realm of headsets over the next few years."

According to Rubin, the distinction between "mixed reality" and virtual reality is central to understanding Reality Labs' mission. "We're betting on three or four things, all of which are interrelated."

While Reality Labs develops virtual reality, a technology that immerses players in 3D virtual worlds, it's also experimenting with augmented reality, a technology that introduces virtual objects into the real world, and mixed reality, which employs cameras to map the real world and then overlays it with virtual images. For the record, Reality Labs is invested in artificial intelligence as well.

"Separate but related to all of these is the metaverse," says Jason Rubin. "At its highest level, the metaverse is the social interaction of people in AR and VR spaces."

META AND THE METAVERSE

When Zuckerberg changed the name of his company from Facebook to Meta, he stated, "We believe the metaverse will be the successor of the mobile internet."

While most experts agree that there will be a metaverse and that it's going to be big, there is less agreement about what it will be. It's depicted in movies as a limitless 3D landscape in which people visit sites, explore worlds, and access nearly unlimited information.

"I don't think that's the case. I think it's going to be fractured," says Remington Scott, founder of HYPERREAL, a company specializing in making "hyper-realistic" avatars such as the dancing Paul McCartney in the Beck/McCartney music video for the song "Find My Way." "Our principle physical realities have barriers. There are walls. [In the metaverse] We'll choose where we want to be within a spectrum of realities."

Though Zuckerberg undoubtedly knows he cannot buy, patent, or own the metaverse, he's spending big developing Horizon World, a 3D world that feels like an early rendition of the Oasis in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*.

Merging Horizon World into prime real estate in the metaverse may not be easy. Comparing the move to Disney creating the world's best food chain and then placing the restaurants in its theme parks, analyst Michael Pachter says, "It's the wrong approach. I think it's going to be more entrepreneurial than that, and I don't think that Zuckerburg is the right guy to do it.

"We'll see. I could be wrong." ■

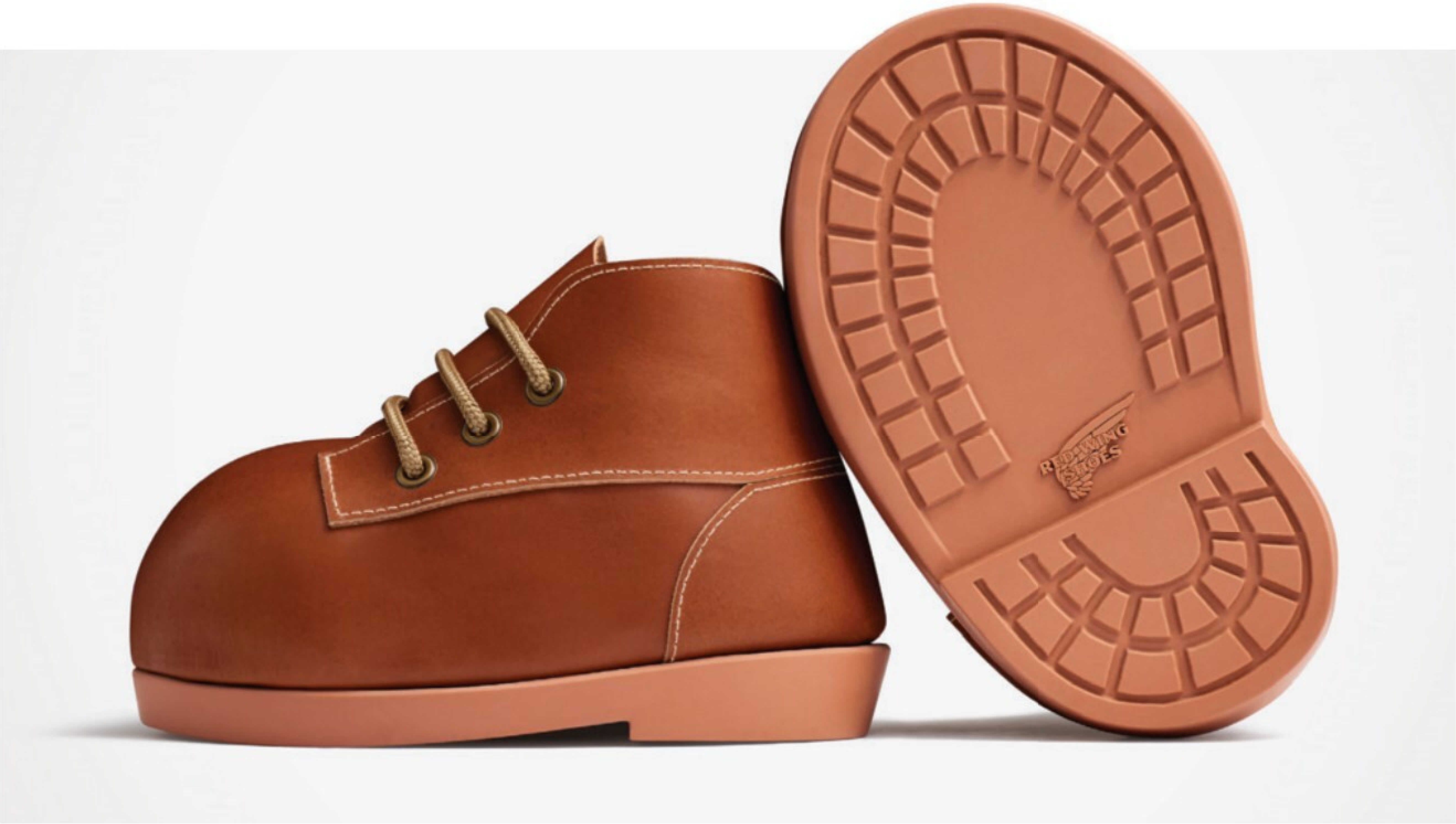
Beat Saber

DELPHI BOXING ACADEMY
HOME OF
APOLLO CREED

Creed: Rise to Glory

Resident Evil 4

MAKING MARIO'S SHOES



NINTENDO ENDED A RECENT LIVE STREAM sharing the final trailer for *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* with a strange and unexpected announcement. Alongside animation studio Illumination, it had teamed up with Red Wing Shoes to make Mario's shoes from the movie, not as a line of shoes for sale, but rather a hyper-realistic version of the boots – odd proportions and all – to be displayed at the official Nintendo Store in New York City.

The interest in Mario's shoes began with the movie's first teaser poster, where the fidelity of Mario's footwear blew fans away. People wanted to know more about them, which led Nintendo and Illumination to contact Red Wing Shoes, a Minnesota company specializing in work boots, about making some. "We got the call, and naturally, we're like, 'Well, Mario is the world's most iconic and beloved plumber. Alright, let's figure out a way to do this," Aaron Seymour-Anderson, Red Wing's head of brand and creative, told us on a Zoom call.

From the beginning, the shoes were always meant as a display piece fully acknowledging Mario's odd proportions, and Red Wing only made one pair. "I think the official stance is Mario doesn't want to share his boots with anyone else," Seymour-Anderson says. "Even Luigi doesn't get a pair yet."

The shoes were designed, built, and stitched by hand in a few months. The most complicated part for Red Wing was creating a shoe not based on a human foot. Ironically, the first thing made in shoe design is called the Last, which is the shape of the foot the shoe is molded around. For Mario's Last, the Red Wing Team had to get the exact proportions from the animation model and 3D print it, sand it down, and then mold and stitch the leather around it, which was handled by Mike Larson, the product development lead. "A foot normally is much longer than it is wide; this was much more like an oval or nearly a square with some rounded edges," Seymour-Anderson says.

Every detail about the shoe is exactly how it appears in the film, down to the bottom. "The outsole matches the exact tread pattern that Mario wears and was affixed to the bottom of the shoe," Seymour-Anderson tells us.

As far as what happens to Mario's shoes now that the movie is out, Seymour-Anderson says it's up to Nintendo. "Don't expect this to be the only story you hear about Mario's boots. Hopefully, there'll be more stories about Mario's boots popping up in the future." **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

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